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ABSTRACT

Intended for adolescents and young adults with learning disabilities and their parents, this curriculum addresses specific social skill problems identified in a needs assessment completed by parents. Two introductory chapters, one for parents and one for young adults, precede the curriculum. Chapter 1 examines how the individual's surroundings affect behavior and how making changes in the setting can facilitate success. Chapter 2 addresses communication skills including: listening for the real content and feelings of messages; restating messages; understanding nonverbal messages; communicating ideas; and asking questions. Decision making skills are the focus of the activities in chapter 3, which helps identify individual strengths, weaknesses, and interests and details six steps in the decision making process. The next chapter looks at skills necessary to follow directions and suggests analyzing the steps involved, double checking directions, and rehearsing new or unfamiliar directions. Chapter 5 discusses strategies for successful problem solving. It explains six problem solving steps and stresses the importance of timing. The sixth chapter looks at strategies for coping with stress and impulses or feelings such as anger. The final two chapters examine employment opportunities and options after high school. The document includes 10 references and gives addresses of four national organizations serving learning-disabled adults. (DB)

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IMPROVING SOCIAL SKILLS:

A Guide For Teenagers, Young Adults, And Parents

Interstate Research Associates

December 1989

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INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS

Good social skills are important to everyone. They enable us to get along with others, form friendships, hold jobs, and work with others toward mutual goals. These are the skills that help us act with others in a way that is socially acceptable and that benefits ourselves and others.

As adults, we have learned how to use our verbal and nonverbal behaviors to get positive responses from others and to obtain pleasure from our interactions. Young adults, as well, learn and use social skills with a variety of people, including parents, teachers, co-workers, and peers. Not all young adults are able to do this; for example, some young adults with learning disabilities, may find social skills particularly difficult. Often, because of the nature of their learning disability, these young adults have difficulty in identifying what behaviors they need to be accepted by peers, family, and others. They often have trouble understanding the rules of communication and for adopting someone else's point of view. Some may find it difficult to recognize meaning in others' behaviors or to understand nonverbal communication. These problems may affect all the interactions these young people have.

In 1986, Interstate Research Associates received a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop strategies for families of children with learning disabilities to help remediate their children's social skill deficits. This curriculum for use by young adults with learning disabilities and their parents is one of the products of that grant. Two additional curricula are available: one for use by parents of young children, and another for use by parents of school-aged children. The materials were developed in response to needs identified by a representative sample of parents of children with learning disabilities. The selected parents completed a *Learning Disabilities Needs Assessment Checklist* in the spring of 1987. The checklist was designed to identify social skills and behavior problems of children and youth with learning disabilities, as perceived by their parents, and to determine parents' needs for helping their children.

Parents were asked to respond to three areas of concern: 1) their child's skill levels in various social skill areas, such as giving compliments, listening to others, following directions, and sharing belongings; 2) the severity of their child's negative behaviors, such as criticizing and making negative comments, refusing to talk, arguing with others, demanding attention, and stealing; and 3) their child's behavior in potential problem situations, such as going to the doctor, riding in the car, doing homework, and interacting with their brothers and sisters.

When the results of the Needs Assessment Checklist were analyzed, it was found that, for the adolescent and young adult population, parents identified five social skill problems which affected over 50% of those surveyed. The social skill problems were: discussing differences without getting angry, continuing to try when frustrated, following directions, asking for help when needed, and refusing requests politely. The analysis also revealed that these problems occurred in a wide range of everyday situations and that a close relationship existed between the most common social skill deficits and the most common behavior problems.

Based on these results, the goal of this curriculum is to provide young adults with learning disabilities and their parents with a guide for learning and teaching needed social skills. The chapters which follow are intended to assist parents and their young adults in teaching and learning the social skills necessary for leading an independent life. The first six chapters deal with basic, yet specific, social skills. Chapter 1 discusses how surroundings affect behavior and how changes can be made in the home and community environment to help the young adult succeed. Chapter 2 discusses communication skills necessary for success. Chapter 3 deals with understanding yourself and making decisions. Chapter 4 offers suggestions on following directions. Chapter 5 focuses on solving problems. Mechanisms for coping with frustration and conflict are presented in Chapter 6. The final two chapters are intended as extensions and applications for the first six: Chapter 7 discusses investigating employment opportunities, and Chapter 8 looks at investigating options for after high school.

Parents using this curriculum are encouraged to discuss the organization of this curriculum with their young adult, and be prepared to offer suggestions on where to begin, and the sequence of chapters to follow. It is recommended that the first six chapters be completed before moving on to Chapters 7 and 8, since many of the skills discussed in these chapters are presented in greater detail in the preceding six. Remember that, as a parent, you were the first and remain the most consistent "teacher" of your young adult. All the positive things that you do for and with your young adult help him or her to grow and learn more effectively. Some adolescents and young adults, however, present more challenges even to the best of parents, and "teaching" them the skills they need requires extra creativity, work, and information. We hope that this curriculum will serve these needs.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE YOUNG ADULT

Have you ever wondered:

Why do some people always seem to get the good jobs?
Why do some people seem to be so popular?
Why do some people always seem to say the wrong thing?
Why do some people seem so calm all the time?
Why do some people always seem to know what to do?

The answer, at least a big part of the answer, is good social skills. Good social skills are important to everyone. They enable us to get along with others, form friendships, hold jobs, and work with others toward mutual goals. These are the skills that help us act with others in a way that is socially acceptable and that benefits ourselves and others.

The question is, "How do you get good social skills?" Some people just naturally seem to have them. Other people, including many young adults with a learning disability, have not acquired these social skills somewhere along the way to growing up. However, it's never too late. Look at all the popular magazines which monthly sell thousands of copies with articles about how to improve yourself in one way or another.

The goal of this curriculum is to provide you, a young adult with a learning disability, a guide for learning and practicing needed social skills and for dealing with related behavior problems.

The chapters which follow are written to help you in learning several social skills necessary for leading an independent life. The first six chapters deal with basic, yet specific, social skills. Chapter 1 discusses how your surroundings can affect your behavior and how you can make changes to help you succeed. Chapter 2 discusses communication skills necessary for success. Of course you know how to talk, but do you know what to say and when it's appropriate to speak and to whom? If you've ever been embarrassed by not knowing what to say or saying the wrong thing, then this chapter may be for you. Chapter 3 deals with making decisions. Chapter 4 offers suggestions on following directions. Chapter 5 focuses on problems and the process for solving them. Everyone has problems, now you can get some suggestions on how to look at these problems in a new way which will make it possible for you to resolve them. Mechanisms for coping with frustration and conflict are presented in Chapter 6. The final two chapters are intended as extensions and applications for the first six: Chapter 7 discusses investigating employment opportunities, and Chapter 8 looks at investigating options for after high school.

Each of the chapters has specific suggestions, strategies, and activities for you to try. These "self tests" will give you the chance to try out the suggestions on yourself. You can try these activities on yourself by working with a friend, parent, or another partner, by writing down the activities, using a computer, or talking into a tape recorder--whatever works best for you. We've included some interviews with other young adults with learning disabilities which you may find interesting.

As you use this guide, look at the chapter titles. Look at the first six chapters. Where do you think you should begin? Some may find it easier to start with Chapter 1, and go right along to Chapter 2, then Chapter 3, and so forth. Others may feel that Chapter 3, "Making Decisions" is a good place to start. Whether you start at the beginning, or select any sequence of the first six chapters, it is important that you complete the first six chapters

BEFORE going on to Chapter 7 and Chapter 8. Many of the skills discussed in the first six chapters are used in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8. Besides, practice makes perfect.

You may also want to discuss the organization of this curriculum with your parents. It is always good to have a partner to work with when you are trying something new. You may want to work through the curriculum with a friend, or a counselor, or another partner. Whichever you choose, ask this person or persons to be prepared to offer suggestions, encouragement and feedback.

We hope that this guide will meet your needs.

Chapter 1

Setting up the Environment

In this chapter, we will look at things in the environment which effect how we act. By reading the material and doing the activities you will see how you react to people and things; so be prepared to look at yourself and ask yourself what you really want.

Our environment influences behavior. While we can learn to adapt to different settings, we can also make the environment as pleasant as possible. This chapter discusses how you, with the help of family and friends, can take a look at your home and community and make some changes that will help you be successful in dealing with people.

Topics discussed in this chapter include:

- IDENTIFYING CAUSE AND EFFECT
- CHANGING THE ENVIRONMENT
- SCHEDULING ACTIVITIES
- USING REMINDERS

IDENTIFYING CAUSE AND EFFECT

There are many things in your environment that "cause" you to behave in a particular way. We call these signals antecedents. Actually, an antecedent is any event which occurs before a behavior. Noise, or tone of voice, a ringing telephone, and laughter are examples of things that might cause you to react. That is, they may effect your behavior.

For each antecedent, or cause, there is a consequence, or **result**. Consequences are the results of a behavior. Another way to think of consequences is to think about what happened. What was the cause? What was the result? What was the consequence? Sometimes it is easier to ask the last question first and work backwards to the cause. This is because it is not always easy to identify the cause.

It is interesting to identify the antecedents and consequences that are currently controlling your behavior. Sometimes it helps to make a list. Think of an event which has happened to you recently. Some examples might include: an argument with a brother, sister, or other family member; a disagreement with a friend or co-worker; eating a whole box of candy when you are watching your weight; listening to music all afternoon when you have a test the next morning; or a "yes" response for a very special date. Now, list everything that happened before the event in as much detail as possible. Try to separate what you actually saw and heard from what you think people were feeling. The following is a record of one person's behavior before work. In this example, the person listed the time of the event, what happened, and the result of the action.

* * * * *

Date: Tuesday
Time: Early Morning
Event: Yelled at brother

List of what happened:
- *Put on clothes*
- *Went to bathroom*
- *Hair brush was not where it's supposed to be*
- *Yelled at Carl about the brush*
- *Carl said he didn't take it*
- *I called Carl a liar and other names*
- *Carl is mad at me*
- *I found my brush in my room*

* * * * *

Sometimes, it can be helpful to put your list into a chart to see exactly what were the causes (antecedents) and what were the results (consequences). The event itself, or what happened, would be in the middle. This chart may help you see where exactly things went wrong.

* * * * *

Antecedents	What Happened	Consequences
Woke up, got dressed, wanted to brush my hair, but the brush wasn't in the bathroom.	*I was fighting with Carl again and the day hadn't even really begun.*	*I am angry; Carl got angry.*
	I found the brush in my room.	*I'm embarrassed.*

* * * * *

The first step is to recognize those parts of your behavior which you'd like to change. This may be that you feel you fight with your brothers and sisters too much, that you forget to do something which angers the people you live with, or that you think you do not behave like the adult you are. When you see clearly what is happening, you can decide how to stop the behavior you don't like. From the example above, the person could decide on several ways to improve his behavior:

1. If finding everything you need to get ready in the morning is stressful, lay out everything you need the night before.

2. If you share a room or bathroom with others and you get angry about them using your belongings, put your own things away in your own drawer, shelf, or closet, or some other place which is just for you.

3. When you're frustrated, ask for help politely. Avoid yelling. In this example, he could have said, "Carl, have you seen my hair brush?", or "Carl, I can't find where I left my brush, can you help me find it?"

This kind of recording and charting is particularly useful when you are tying to figure out what things influence your behavior. Before you begin a program to change your behavior, or when you don't feel your current strategies are working, an **Antecedent-What Happened-Consequence Chart** might help you identify the factors that are working for or against you. Then you can try to remove antecedents that signal inappropriate behavior and instead provide ones that signal good social behavior. Look at the next example:

* * * * *

John got home from class and saw a note on the refrigerator door. The note said, "Please mow the lawn." Just then, John's friend, Allen called. Allen said that the guys were getting together at Shawn's house. John grabbed a coke from the refrigerator as he talked to Allen and checked the cabinets for potato chips. Finding the chips gone, John yelled at his sister for eating all the snacks. John then ran out of the house to Allen's. The lawn was forgotten. When John returned home, his parents were angry with him because the lawn was not mowed.

Antecedents	*What Happened*	*Consequences*
Arrives home; sees note.	*Reads the note.*	
Telephone rings.	*Talks to Allen.*	*Forgets note.*
Telephone conversation continues.	*John looks for a snack; yells at sister; goes over to Allen's house.*	*Lawn not mowed.*
Parents find lawn not mowed.	*John returns home*	*Parents angry;* *John embarrassed.*

* * * * *

Can you see what is happening in this example? John is doing too many things at the same time. This is distracting him from paying attention to the note. Obviously, John should not do too many things at one time.

Below, is a list of behaviors that John would like to change:

1. Fighting with his sister.
2. Forgetting to do the things that he's been asked to do.
3. Upsetting his family.
4. Feeling embarrassed; he doesn't mean to cause all this trouble.

With this list in mind, here are some things that John could do to improve the situation:

1. John should only do one thing at a time.
2. When the phone rings and friends want John to do something, he could say, "Let me think a minute, what do I have to do this afternoon?", or "That sounds great. Let me call you back in a few minutes when I've had a chance to organize myself."
3. John should take a few minutes to quietly go over his afternoon schedule.

4. John should ask his sister where things are in a quiet and calm manner, after finishing his telephone call.

For many people, doing one thing at a time makes things easier. While the situation may not always be in your control, knowing and understanding that you need to do only one thing at a time can be important. Just being able to say, "Just a minute please, let me get myself organized," can allow you enough time to quietly think about what you are doing.

Sometimes you'll notice that people behave consciously in one place and impulsively in others. It is not uncommon for the setting we are in to in part determine how we act. The setting or location in which a behavior occurs or events that occur in those settings are examples of ongoing or long-term antecedents. Many times you can make physical changes in your surroundings which make it easier to act the way you want.

You can use this strategy to notice antecedents in your environment which trigger inappropriate behavior. By changing the antecedents in your environment--in John's example, by limiting himself to one activity at a time--you can avoid impulsive behavior by limiting the distractions in your environment.

The following activity will help you to identify the Antecedents, What Happens, and Consequences of your behavior.

Activity 1.1

Choose a social behavior which causes you trouble. First, make an observational record of this behavior. Second, list the Antecedents, What Happened, and Consequences that you observe. You can also complete this activity by asking a family member, or friend to observe the behavior you've selected.

Date ______________ Time __________

Behavior to Observe:______________________

Observation Record:

Antecedents	**What Happened**	**Consequences**

RESTRUCTURE THE ENVIRONMENT

Sometimes it helps to rearrange the environment. For instance, if you are easily distracted at dinner by a television, turn it off. If you have difficulty concentrating on homework or other tasks when the telephone rings, try to schedule these activities when the telephone is not so busy, or ask friends not to call during certain hours, or ask someone in the household to answer the telephone during this time, or use a telephone answering machine. You could arrange time for homework and not answer the telephone during that time. This will allow you to reduce distractions. In other situations, you can organize the environment to make certain kinds of behavior easier to perform or more likely to occur. Here are some examples.

* * * * *

Alex is very distractable. He has a hard time to doing homework with so much going on in the house. Yet, he is going to a community college. Realizing that distractibility is a problem, Alex now takes his homework to the library and stays there until his younger brothers and sisters are in bed. Other times, Alex goes to bed early and gets up at 6:00 a.m. to do his homework in a quiet house.

Beth lives with several roommates. Beth usually arrives home before her roommates and takes telephone messages from the answering machine. Beth has a habit of turning on the stereo when she comes home. Beth is distracted by the music blaring from the stereo and often does not first get paper and pencils to take messages before she turns on the answering machine. She often tries to remember the messages without writing them down, but often she does not. This results in her roommates getting angry at her for not giving them their messages. Beth has worked to remember not to turn on the stereo before taking the messages off the answering machine, and to keep a ready supply of paper and pencils on the counter by the answering machine.

* * * * *

Another way to change the surroundings is to add equipment that will make it easier for you to behave the way you would like. For instance, you could put a mirror on the door to check your appearance before you leave the house. Timers, answering machines, and other types of equipment can help you to organize your environment. There are many good booklets, articles and books that offer suggestions for organizing yourself. Check your local bookstore, or public or college library. Ask your teacher, counselor or the librarian to help you find one.

Here is an example of someone needing organization.

* * * * *

Bill's room was always a mess. His clothes were always lying on the floor and piled high on the chair. The dresser was cluttered with all kinds of things. He could never find what he wanted and never had clean clothes. He asked his father to help him install another clothes rod in the closet, bought small dividers for the dresser drawer and a laundry basket. After a week of learning how to use the new equipment, Bill's room is much neater and he spends less time looking for things.

* * * * *

Temporary changes help you behave in a certain way. Suppose you have trouble finding things to talk about with other people. Set up the environment to stimulate conversations like Jim does.

* * * * *

Some friends of the family were coming over to visit. One daughter was the same age as Jim, but he always had a hard time talking to her. Tonight Jim got out the Risk and Monopoly games, along with his tape collection, so that they would have something to do. The conversation they had was natural, not forced, and they both enjoyed having a conversation around things that they both enjoy.

* * * * *

REARRANGE SCHEDULES

Another way of changing your surroundings is to schedule your activities so that it is easier to act the way you want. Examples include going grocery shopping when the store is not crowded, or picking out clothes for the next day to avoid last minute tension. See what happened in these examples.

* * * * *

The Farmer family all got up at 7:00 in the morning. Everybody was in a hurry, so there was often fighting and bickering with all three trying to use the bathroom at the same time. John decided to start taking his shower at night and then get up at 6:45 to shave so that he could have the bathroom before anyone else got up.

Lucy found that going to the mall at 10:00 am., when it would not be busy, made shopping easier. It also made it easier to concentrate on what she was doing. The clerks now had time to talk to her and the stores weren't crowded.

* * * * *

The next activity is useful in rearranging your schedule.

Activity 1.2

1. **Name one behavior that you would like to work on.**

2. **What antecedents, or causes, seem to signal the behavior?**

3. **What antecedents, or causes, would signal more appropriate behavior?**

4. **What antecedents that signal positive behavior are present in the environment?**

5. **How can you rearrange your environment or schedule to take advantage of these antecedents for positive behavior?**

PROVIDE REMINDERS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

There are a variety of short-term events that can effect our behavior. For instance. when we hear the start of our favorite TV show we will come running. Likewise, we write messages to ourselves to remember to do certain tasks, or set an alarm clock to wake up in the morning. In much the same way, you can give yourself "reminders."

* * * * *

Arturo looses track of time; he stares into space, or just day dreams. When Arturo sits down to breakfast he sets a kitchen timer for 10 minutes to remind him to stay on schedule.

Nancy often forgets things; she can not think of more than one thing at a time. Nancy leaves notes for herself. For instance, she will stick a note on the bathroom mirror or on the car steering wheel so she remembers to make a stop on the way home.

Jim is often forgetful. Jim marks his calendar for library book due dates. He always places a "" two days before the books are due. This gives him time to locate the books and to get ready to go to the library.*

* * * * *

The next activity provides an example of a chart for routines. It can show the necessary activities in the correct order. These can be checked off in order as they are finished.

Activity 1.3

Make a reminder chart to help you complete an activity. Examples can be used for school, work, or recreational activities. You can put the activities in order to help you complete the activity. Pictures, colors, computer graphics can also be used to make this activity creative.

Name the Activity ______________________________

Things to do:

1. ____

____

2. ____

____

3. ____

____

4. ____

____

5. ____

____

SUMMARY

In this chapter we discussed causes, or antecedents; those conditions which occur before a behavior which may actually trigger or set the stage for you to act a certain way. We discussed identifying these antecedents and then removing the ones that trigger unwanted behavior and adding antecedents for desired behaviors. Ways to signal desired behavior include restructuring the setting through furniture or equipment changes, rearranging schedules, and posting reminders for you to see or hear. Changing certain things in your environment can go a long way toward helping you be more successful.

To Parents:

In this chapter, young adults are to look at environmental variables which effect their behavior. Read through the chapter on your own. Think about the activities - you may even try some of them yourself. They should help you prepare to be a facilitator for your young adult.

For restructuring the environment, be thinking about these issues and your household. Make a list of what is and is not possible to change. Think about possible solutions so that you can help your youth brainstorm ways to restructure his/her environment. This is just to give you a head start, but you should not make the list for your youth. The lesson to be gained is your youth's going through the process himself/herself. Remember, you are the facilitator/mentor and are not to do the work for you young adult.

In rearranging schedules, be prepared to offer adjustments. It would be helpful to you to think about how your family presently schedules time and where the conflicts are.

Providing reminders is the next topic. Think about places where that reminders can be placed. These places should be near the used area but located so that they do not interfere with the functioning of others.

As you help your youth work through these issues, watch for places where you could change the environment that would improve your own control. You may find this process is as useful to you and other family members as it is to your young adult with a learning disability.

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Chapter 2

Communication Skills: Listening and Speaking

In this chapter, we will look at the two most important skills involved in effective communication. These skills are:

1) Listening, or *RECEIVING* messages

and

2) Speaking, or *SENDING* messages

Both listening and speaking are necessary for successful social interactions, on the job, and at school. This chapter discusses receiving and sending messages and offers ideas on how to improve your communication skills.

Topics discussed in this chapter include:

- **Listening for the Real Content and Feelings of Messages**
- **Restating Messages**
- **Non-Verbal Messages**
- **Communicating Ideas**
- **Asking Questions**

Why are we including a chapter on listening and speaking? Because research has shown that many social difficulties come from language difficulties. In fact, most young adults with learning disabilities have some degree of auditory-receptive difficulties. This means that there is a problem in receiving and/or sending messages--listening and speaking. Another problem is that it may be easier to understand words, or messages with exact meaning. For example, it is easier to understand a phrase like, "it's cold today," than more complicated or abstract ideas, such as "that wasn't fair." Because of this difficulty, you may notice that you do not understand or "get" jokes, puns, or sarcasm. It's not surprising: when you have auditory-receptive problems, listening and/or speaking may not come easily.

As one person put it, "Have you ever tried driving in the fog and couldn't quite see the edge of the road? Have you ever passed billboards so fast that you couldn't quite get their meaning?" Another young man said, "I understand what I want to say until I have to say it."

It is important to all of us to be accepted by others, to form relationships, to make friends, and to get along. To do this we need some social skills. Yet, it has been shown that the more language difficulties a person has, the more difficulty he or she will have with social skills. This may show up when a person has problems on the job, at school, on an interview, or asking for or during a date. What may have started as a language disability can now be causing problems with social skills.

Let's look at some examples. You may have a hard time learning when to use formal language and informal language. It may be OK to use some words with your friends, but you need to use different words at school or at work. Some young adults with learning disabilities may find it difficult to start a conversation, to enter an on-going conversation, or to recognize when it's their turn to talk. This can lead to interrupting, or not answering when the speaker is waiting for a response. It can mean being left out of conversations, or having others think of you as rude. It may be hard to know when to be a listener, when to be assertive, and when to stop talking. The results of this are that you feel that you are always being taken advantaged of, or that you feel you are always getting into arguments.

Perhaps the best example of the need for good communication skills is demonstrated by dating. When you are with someone on a date or just walking together, you need to be a good conversationalist. This involves both listening and speaking skills. Interestingly, the easiest ways to appear as a good conversationalist is to be a good listener, to know when and how to ask questions, and how to express ideas. These skills can mean the difference between developing a long lasting relationship or having an unsuccessful dating experience.

This chapter will have two main parts--**LISTENING** and **SPEAKING**. We will give you some ideas for activities you can do to improve your skills. They can be improved; it's not too late.

LISTENING SKILLS: RECEIVING MESSAGES

Developing good listening skills may be one of the more difficult problems you face when communicating with others. Sometimes you may hear but not understand what the other person is saying or what the other person means. As a result, you may incorrectly respond to what you may *THINK* you heard.

Good listening involves more than waiting in a polite way for the other person to finish talking. It requires you to *HEAR* the message the other person is sending. This may require you to:

Listen for the **Real Content** of the message
Listen for the **Feelings** of the message

Restating Messages

The person speaking needs to know that you are listening. One way to show that you understand the speaker is to restate the message. This does not mean that you repeat what was just said in the speaker's exact words. This does mean that you restate the message in your own words. You could say, "You mean you are really angry because you think we lost the game because the rain made the field so muddy that we couldn't do our best?" Restating the message will let the other person know that you were listening to what was being said and that you understand the meaning of the message. Obviously, you wouldn't restate everything said in a conversation. The most important parts can be restated to avoid misunderstanding either the *REAL CONTENT* or the *FEELINGS* of the message. One easy way to be sure of another person's message is to check it out.

Activity 2.1: Check it Out

This activity will need to be done with a partner. Have your partner read each of these statements to you:

> **Assume that you have just started a new job as a stock clerk in a grocery store. Your supervisor says, *"For each item that comes in, for example peaches, you are to make a list of the item, its stock number, and the number of cases received. At the end of the day you are to give this list to me."***

STEP 1: RESTATE THE MESSAGE. **Be clear and complete so both the supervisor and you will be sure to understand the directions.**

STEP 2: ASK FOR CONFIRMATION. **Ask a question to be sure that your restatement of what the supervisor said is correct AND complete.**

> **You have just come home. Your roommate says, *"Richard called and wants you to go to the movies later this evening. He said to meet him at the ticket counter of the Carroll Theater, at the corner of Valley and Pine at 7:30. He'll have the tickets already."***

STEP 1: RESTATE THE MESSAGE.

STEP 2: ASK FOR CONFIRMATION.

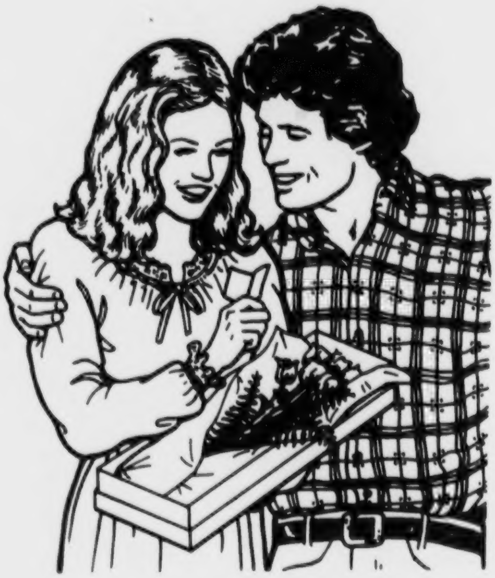
Non-Verbal Messages

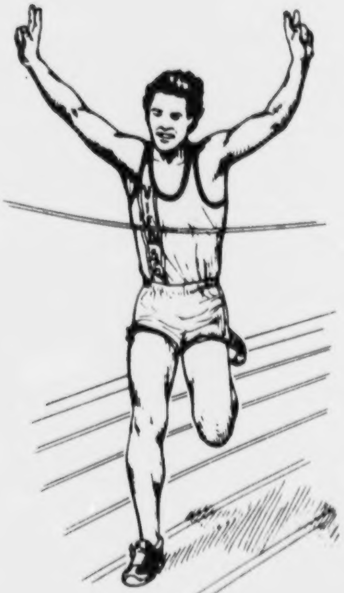
We also receive a lot of *NON-VERBAL* messages, such as expressions, hand gestures, tone of voice, and body language. These non-verbal messages tell us the moods and attitudes of the speaker. Tone of voice can let the listener know if the speaker is nervous or is very excited. People with learning disabilities often have difficulties "reading" the non-verbal messages of others.

Some practice in careful listening and activities such as the ones discussed above can be used in improving your skills with non-verbal messages. In addition to restating the message, you can ask a question or make a statement which reflects how the speaker is sending the message. You may ask, "You sound angry, are you?", or "From the way you are standing, you look like you're in a rush." Some gestures are easy to recognize, others are more complicated. Try the following activity for practice.

Activity 2.2

Look at the pictures below. Describe the non-verbal message.





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Listening also involves focusing your attention on the speaker, to show that you are really listening. People like to talk to those who *LOOK* interested. People who look like they are listening send positive non-verbal messages which can affect the speaker's message.

Here are some tips on how to LOOK like you're listening:

1. Stop talking. People can't listen if they are talking.

2. Look at the speaker. Look at the person who's speaking to show that you are interested.

3. Remove distractions. If there is too much else going on, like loud music, or the television, turn it off. You could also suggest moving away from the distraction.

4. Be patient. Allow plenty of time to listen to what is being said. Try not to interrupt the person you're listening to; wait for the speaker to come to the end of what they are saying.

5. Pay attention to what's being said. Try to listen to what is being said rather than thinking about what you next comment will be. Remember, it's better to have completely understood the message and be accurate in your reply than to be quick to answer wrong.

6. Ask questions. Questioning is important. It lets the speaker know that you're listening and are interested. Be sure your questions are about what the speaker has said, not something else you're thinking of.

7. Watch for non-verbal messages. Pay attention to facial expressions, such as a smile or frown, to gestures, and to the tone of voice. These are signals which tell you if the person is serious or joking, if they are angry, comfortable, bored, worried, etc.

8. Try not to argue or criticize. When you argue, you put the speaker on the defensive. If you disagree with what's being said, try to state it positively. Some examples include saying, "I never thought of it like that," or "Things must be done differently in your company."

9. Hold your temper. If you are frustrated by either the subject of the conversation or in following the conversation, stay calm. You might say something like, "Can we continue this conversation later." Another suggestion is to admit that you are frustrated and calmly explain why you are getting upset.

Summary

Listening can be difficult. Understand that it takes time, effort, and practice to become an effective listener. Actually, most people do not listen as much or as carefully as they should. It is something that we all must work on. This can help improve your social life and be very useful on the job.

Good listening can be broken down into four basic skills:

1. LOOK at the speaker.

2. ACT--nod, smile, or say "yes" or "I know."

3. RESTATE or ASK QUESTIONS to be sure the message is understood.

4. SHARE your ideas to show you are listening and are interested.

SPEAKING SKILLS: SENDING MESSAGES

Sending clear messages is important. When communicating your feelings, ideas, asking questions, giving directions, or asking for something, it is important to be as clear and direct as possible. This will make it more likely that the message will be received correctly. After all, the reason for talking was to communicate information; it does little or no good if that isn't accomplished.

We all speak in a variety of situations. We speak with many people we know closely, and with others we do not know, or know casually. There are situations which are very comfortable, like being at home with the family, situations which are more formal, like talking to the class instructor or the minister, situations in which we must speak to strangers, like in a store or when applying for a job, just to name a few.

There is a real difference in speaking to a classmate or to the instructor, or in speaking to a co-worker or the boss. There are informal speaking situations, like asking for directions, and formal speaking situations, like asking for a job. In social situations these differences exist too; there's a big difference in meeting a person your own age at a party and spending time talking or meeting a person twenty years older than you and having a conversation. There's often a difference between talking to a man or to a woman.

Deciding What to Say and How to Say It

There are a variety of skills involved in being able to talk with others. What you say will depend on both the situation and the person you're talking to. Speaking will also require you to have something to say to the other person. Will you be talking about:

- Specific Information?
- Personal Feelings?
- Requests?
- Ideas?

Two common problems in speaking are: 1) deciding how to express yourself in the appropriate manner; and 2) finding the right words and phrases to get your idea across. Here are some general suggestions:

1. Be specific and clear, say exactly what you mean.

2. Be polite at the same time. This can be difficult, but if you consider the situation and the person to whom you are speaking, you should be able to keep the message clear and the conversation polite.

3. Think about the effect of what you're saying. Remember, for almost everything you say, your message will or will not be understood and the conversation will or will not continue.

4. People make judgments about you by what you say. Your words are presenting an image to the people you're talking to. People will judge your intelligence, sense of humor, or capabilities by what you have to say. It may be a good idea to plan your

topics before starting the conversation. This may slow you down at first, but with practice it should get faster.

5. Make verbal and non-verbal messages consistent. It is important that what you say, how you say it, and what your body language communicate are the same. For example, if you're pleased with people, smile when you tell them. It's difficult for people to realize that you are really angry at them if you laugh or giggle when you wanted to "tell them off."

6. Be sure to react to how others feel about your messages by listening carefully to their responses.

Practice these suggestions with a friend, parent, or partner until you feel comfortable with them. This will help you to feel natural in your conversations with others.

You may have been aware of problems in situations when you tried very hard to find the right words, and to describe your own feelings. You may have felt frustrated and nervous that you were not getting your point across. Or, you may have been in situations where the other person misunderstood your message or "took it the wrong way," resulting in their expressing anger when you didn't mean to offend anyone. These situations can make it even more difficult to communicate with others.

With these general suggestions in mind, let's look at two specific messages you may want to send: ideas and questions.

EXPRESSING IDEAS

When someone gets an idea in a comic strip, it is often pictured as a light bulb going off overhead. Whenever we get an idea, we imagine how exciting it will be to share it. How easy it would be if all we had to do was to open our mouths and an idea would shine brilliantly like a 100 watt bulb. But, sometimes the reality of getting that brilliant idea out of our minds, into our mouths, and across to others leaves us in the dark.

Expressing ideas is probably the most common form of conversation, both informal and formal. It is helpful to recognize that there are many different kinds of ideas and different kinds of messages to convey these ideas. For example, you might have an idea of how to improve your job, or have an idea about a weekend trip, or an idea for a term paper, an idea about the best way to drive to a certain place, or an idea of how to decorate your house. These are all different types of ideas.

The following suggestions may help you express your idea. It is important to remember that before you express your idea, you need to clearly identify what it is you want to say, to whom, and how you want to say it (informal or formal):

1. Get the other person's attention. Be sure that you have the person's attention before you speak. Wait until the conversation has ended or until the conversation is about your topic. Begin by saying something like, "I had an idea about that and I'd like to tell you."

2. Look at the person. Remember that what you want to say is important. People will pay attention better when you are looking at them while talking.

3. State your message clearly. It may take several steps to convey the idea. You may want to say, "I have several things to tell you. First...". Then, divide your idea into all its parts. For example, if you want to talk about your idea for improvement at work, you could start by talking briefly about how the job is done now, and what you think is wrong with this method (always state the problem in a positive manner). Then describe how you think it could be done better, and the specific benefits of this improvement. Most ideas have several parts to them and in thinking through these parts, you may even improve on the original idea.

4. Confirm that the message was received. This can be done by saying something like, "do you understand what I'm saying?" or "what do you think of this idea?" You may notice that the listener is nodding in agreement or shaking his head in disagreement. The listener may look confused and need more explanation. Body language can also tell you if your message is being received clearly.

5. Wait for a response. Be prepared for feedback. This will mean that you are now a listener.

6. Clarify and explain. You may feel that the person has not received your message correctly or completely. Say, "That's not exactly what I meant," or try to restate your message.

7. Be prepared for questions. If you find you do not know the answer to a question, be honest about it. Say, "I didn't think of that. Let me think about it and see if I can come up with a good answer. Can we talk about this some more later?"

The next activity will provide you with practice for expressing an idea. Give it a try.

Activity 2.3: Expressing an Idea

Think of an idea. Examples include: an opinion about your favorite team, you best idea about improving something at work, your ideas about exercise, or why you like a particular movie. Now, follow these steps to develop you idea and to express it to another person:

Step 1. What are the main parts of this idea? Get a piece of paper and write down all the parts of this idea in any order at all. Just list everything that you think of on this topic.

Step 2. Which of the items in your list is really important? Read over your list and cross out everything which is either not very important or not exactly part of this idea.

Step 3. Which of the remaining items are the same or similar to each other? Combine items which are more-or-less the same thing.

Step 4. Come up with a plan of how you will describe the idea.

Step 5. Put these items in order of importance or in the sequence in which they occur.

Step 6. Now try to express your idea to someone. Refer to your list to keep you on the track of expressing your idea clearly, and to help you to be specific about the parts of your idea.

Here is an example:

* * * * *

TOPIC: Walking is good exercise.

STEP 1: LIST THE MAIN PARTS OF THE IDEA:

Walking gets me outside for fresh air.

Walking helps me control my weight.

Walking is good for my heart.

I need to loose weight.

I need to walk the dog everyday anyway.

There are many good books on walking.

My neighbor walks everyday and she looks great.

It's a good way to meet my neighbors.

I don't know much about walking as a form of exercise.

I hate to jog and they say walking can be just as good.

You'd have to skip days when it was raining or just too hot or cold.

You really should have good walking shoes.

You need to walk quickly for it to be good exercise.

It reduces stress.

It's a break in the daily routine.

STEP 2. CROSS OUT WHAT IS NOT IMPORTANT:

Walking gets me outside for fresh air.

Walking helps me control my weight.

Walking is good for my heart.

I need to loose weight.

~~I need to walk the dog everyday anyway.~~

There are many good books on walking.

~~My neighbor walks everyday and she looks great.~~

It's a good way to meet my neighbors.

I don't know much about walking as a form of exercise.

~~I hate to jog and they say walking can be just as good.~~

~~You'd have to skip days when it was raining or just too hot or cold.~~

You really should have good walking shoes.

You need to walk quickly for it to be good exercise.

It reduces stress.

It's a break in the daily routine.

Step 3: **Combine items which are more-or-less the same.**

Walking gets me outside for fresh air.

Walking helps me control my weight.
I need to loose weight.

Walking is good for my heart.

There are many good books on walking.
I don't know much about walking as a form of exercise.

It's a good way to meet my neighbors.

You really should have good walking shoes.

You need to walk quickly for it to be good exercise.

It reduces stress.

It's a break in the daily routine.

Step 4: **Come up with a plan of how you will describe the idea:**

I will start by talking about the fact that walking is good for you. Then I will talk about what you need in order to walk as exercise. Finally, I will talk about the benefits of walking and about the benefits of exercise itself.

Step 5: **Put the items in order:**

Walking is good for the heart.
Walking will help me to loose the weight I need.
Walking reduces stress.
Walking gets me out in the fresh air.
I don't know much about exercise, but I do know there are

many good books about it.
You really need to have good walking shoes.
You need to walk quickly for walking to be good exercise.
Walking is a break in the daily routine.
Walking is a good way to meet the neighbors.

STEP 6: **EXPRESS YOUR IDEA:**

You know, I agree with you that we all need to exercise more.

I think walking is good exercise. I've heard that walking is good for the heart and it would be a good way for me to loose weight. I've also heard that walking can help reduce stress, and we all have stress! Getting outside for fresh air is also a benefit of walking.

There are things you need to know about walking as a form of exercise. There are many books on walking which tell you everything you need to know. For example, you really need to wear proper shoes if you plan to walk a lot. How fast you walk is also important. These books can give you all the information you need to know about exercising this way.

There are other benefits too. It's great to be able to take a break during the day and go for a walk. It really makes the day go by more pleasantly. Besides that, if you walk around your own neighborhood you will meet many neighbors you may never have met before, and your social life could improve as well as your health.

* * * * *

ASKING QUESTIONS

Asking questions is an important part of sending messages. Questioning allows you to learn more about what is being discussed and to clear up any misunderstandings. It can also get other people to share more information and to talk about their ideas and feelings. People know that you are listening and are interested when you ask questions.

The types of questions you ask are important. Questions fall into several categories.

For example, there are *OPEN* and *CLOSED* questions. Open questions allow the speaker to express ideas, feelings, and experiences. They can broaden the conversation. Some open questions might be:

- "How was work today?"
- "You don't seem yourself today, is something bothering you?"
- "I'm considering taking a computer class. How did you like your class and did it help you at work?"
- You seem so popular with the girls! What do you talk about when you're with girls?"

Closed questions are short and often limit conversation. These questions ask a person to answer in a few words, usually with a "yes" or "no." Closed questions can be used to guide a conversation, or to make sure someone understands what you mean. Some closed questions might be:

- "Where were you born?"
- "Do you like pizza?"
- "Do you like your computer class?"
- "Is it cold outside?"

It is also very important to ask questions which are on the same topic as the conversation. For example, if the speaker is describing his trip to the beach and you say, "That's a great sweater, where did you get it?" the speaker may feel that you are not interested in what he's talking about and that you're not paying attention. This question may not be received as a compliment on the sweater, but rather as an indication that you are bored with the conversation.

It is important to only ask genuine questions. A question to which you already know the answer can be very annoying. While you may be interested in continuing the conversation and drawing out more information, the speaker may know that you aren't really interested in the answer. The goal is to ask questions to enhance the conversation, not just to extend it.

When the speaker answers your question, listen with your full attention. Allow the person time to respond to one question before asking another one. This will prevent you from asking something that's already been explained and will let the speaker know you're interested, and that you understand what he's saying and that you want to know more.

The following activity will help you practice asking questions.

Activity 2.4 Asking Relevant Questions

This activity can be done alone. However, it will work better with two or three people. Each of you should imagine that you are a detective. Here's the situation:

> *You've just arrived at a restaurant to investigate a possible accident. As you walk in the door, the manager of the restaurant tells you that the man at the corner table fell off his chair and is lying on the floor. The woman with him screamed and fainted. Another woman at the next table with several friends ran over to check the man. "I'm a nurse," she said. Later she said, "I think someone should call an ambulance. I think this man has had a heart attack." The woman companion is conscious again, and sits on the floor sobbing.*

As the ambulance pulls up, you decide to ask some questions. What questions will you ask?

1. List the questions you would ask the following people:

    - The woman companion.
    - The manager.
    - The waiter.
    - The nurse.
    - The other witnesses.

2. Now, look at your questions. Which ones are the most important and relevant? Are these closed or open questions? Why? What information do you hope to gain from each question?

3. If you have several friends doing this exercise, read your questions to each other. Will you ask different questions? What types of questions do you think will be most effective?

Here is another activity for you to try:

Activity 2.5

In this activity, you are going to be an interviewer. You want to know more about the person you're interviewing. The situation may be a job interview, or for an interview with a movie or music star for a magazine, or maybe you're interviewing your mother to learn how she met your father and when they decided to get married. Be sure that you have a specific purpose for this interview. You may want to know what educational background a movie star had, or you may want to know the past work experiences of a person applying for a job.

1. **Make a list of the questions you could ask to learn this information. Now, look at your list and think about the possible answer to each question. For each question, decide if it will get the response you want. If not, cross it off your list.**

2. **Now, take the list of remaining questions and put them in a logical order. Which question will you ask first, second, etc.? Finally, look over the list and decide which questions are open, and which questions are closed.**

3. **If you have the opportunity, try your interview out on someone. Then, rethink your questions and "grade" yourself on your job as an interviewer.**

Summary

Sending messages can be difficult for many people. There are many points to consider and skills to remember. Take time to review the following basic skills for sending messages and speaking to other people:

1. Make sure you understand what it is you want to communicate. Do you want to send an idea message, ask a question, share a feeling, express information or make a demand? Be prepared to communicate by knowing the purpose of your message.

2. Be aware that you and the other person will react to a message. Feelings are important. State your feelings clearly, using phrases such as "I feel...". State what you think the other person is feeling by using a phrase such as, "I want to understand how you are feeling...is this the way you feel about...?"

3. Send your message as clearly as possible. Try not to cover too much ground in the first sentence. Know what it is, as much as possible, about what it is you want to say. Then take the time to use details as they are necessary.

4. Pay attention to the person you are sending a message to. Look at them, and avoid distractions which can block effective speaking.

5. Allow the other person time to ask questions to clarify your message, or to give you a response.

6. Remember that communication is a two way street. Make sure others understand what you are stating by keeping your messages simple and clear. You will need to listen to their responses and be ready to clarify and confirm your message if necessary by restating your message in another way.

7. Practice your speaking skills often. Remember, improving your speaking skills will take time and practice. Don't allow frustration the first few times to cause you to avoid improving this important skill. Reward yourself for sending successful messages, and learn from your mistakes.

SUMMARY

This chapter has focused on the basic skills of communication; listening and speaking. This skill is often the most difficult for people, especially many individuals with a learning disability. Patience, practice, and feedback are keys to improving your communication skills. Try not to take on the world of communication. Select the skill or skills you want to improve. Maybe listening skills will help you to improve your speaking skills. Or, perhaps you can use your effective speaking skills to improve your listening ability. Which ever you choose, remember that communication is a give and take situation. There are always others involved. The following issues should be considered when seeking to communicate in a positive manner:

1. Social rules differ in different situations, places, and cultures. These rules require a special kind of learning. Many times, they are taught directly: at home, in school, at work, during religious activities, in recreational situations, and so on. Being aware of the appropriate cultural rules will help your communication. Think about the situation in which you are communicating. What are the rules? How can you become more aware of them and practice them?

2. Be aware of the environment in which you are communicating. If there are a lot of distractions, like television, the radio, or other people talking, you might want to make some changes or move to another place. There may also be situations in which personal conversation is either difficult or not acceptable, such as work, in the elevator, and so on.

3. Keep in mind the feelings of the person you're talking to. Will your conversation offend him or her, or make the person angry, sad or be of interest?

4. Communication is risky. When we listen and speak, we disclose ourselves to others, and others disclose themselves to us. We all have fears of being put down when we talk, or share our feelings and thoughts. When we listen and speak effectively, we may change how we and others think and feel.

To Parents:

This chapter discusses communication skills--listening and speaking. For young adults with learning disabilities, communication can be the single most difficult social skill. For many reasons, your young adult may have difficulty understanding and sending messages. As you read this chapter, consider what some of these difficulties may be. Perhaps the problem is perceptual, either in auditory perception, or understanding signals. On the other hand, the difficulty may be in distractions in the environment. Still other difficulties may lie in your son or daughter's ability to fully comprehend what is being said. Whatever the difficulty, be aware of it and be prepared to offer constructive encouragement and

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feedback. Discuss these issues with your young adult, and help them to understand how these difficulties affect their communication skills.

Next, be aware of your own communication skills. How do you receive and deliver messages? How do you communicate with your son or daughter? Are you aware of their communication difficulties and do you accommodate for them? You are a role model for effective communication. Practice these activities with your young adult. Role playing can be an effective technique for practicing these activities.

Remember that we communicate differently at work, in social situations, with our family, and with other people. We use different body language and different vocabulary. Just as we dress differently for different occasions, we communicate differently. There are a number of techniques which help your young adult to become a more effective communicator and, therefore, more socially skilled. The techniques discussed in this chapter are just a few that may help.

Chapter 3

Making Decisions

In this chapter, we will look at how well you understand yourself and how you make decisions. Making decisions can influence how we get along with others, how they perceive us, and how we feel about ourselves. We make decisions everyday, but, believe it or not, many of us rarely stop and think about how we do this. We all want to make "good" decisions. But what does this really mean? In this chapter, we will use the phrase, "making informed decisions." Making informed decisions means considering how we think about ourselves--our interests, values, skills, and abilities--which effect our decision making. Be prepared to think about your "unique self" as you proceed through the decision making process.

Topics discussed in this chapter include:

* **UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF**
* **IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES**
* **IDENTIFYING INTERESTS**
* **SIX STEPS IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS**

As you grow older, fewer decisions are made *FOR* you and more are made *BY* you. Making your own decisions is an indication that you are taking responsibility for yourself and your actions; that you are becoming an adult. We all face decisions everyday. Some are small and have little effect which ever way we choose. Other decisions are major and have life long consequences. It is important to know how to make informed decisions. Decisions, or making choices, are always important, no matter how old we get or how many decisions we have already made, it is good to stop and think about the choices we make.

KNOWING YOURSELF

Making an informed decision means that you have made a decision that you are comfortable with, that you have made with knowledge and understanding of yourself and your options. Many times, when you are not comfortable with a decision that was made by or for you, it is because you did not have enough information or were not involved in the decision making process. Before you can make informed decisions, you need to learn how to. Most importantly, you need to know yourself. Armed with this knowledge, you are empowered. You will be able to look at options and decide which are best for you, and equally important, recognize that fear or indecision only means that you need more information to make the decision. Often, knowing that you need more information can be more important than making the actual decision, whether that information is about yourself or the option. For example, we all make decisions about our career and job. Making a decision to change jobs or careers requires information. Types of information necessary include the kind of information about yourself: what are your likes and dislikes, and what are your strengths and weaknesses? Other types of information are about your career options: what skills are required, what is your desired salary, how will you get to and from work, and what are the benefits of the career?

Reviewing information and making judgments is what making a decision is all about. This is called informed decision making. This is what reviewing your options in life is all about--looking at your choices, gathering information, gathering more information, and feeling confident and comfortable in the decision you have made.

It is important to realize that you have been making decisions hundreds of times a day, every day of your life. When you were a child, you decided what to play with, where to play, what to wear, etc. The only thing that has changed is the complexity of the decisions and the expected or anticipated impact on your life. By making decisions, you are taking more responsibility for the direction of your life. Making an informed decision requires knowing yourself, knowing what information you need, and making a decision after reviewing the information.

The following activities will require that you use all of your previous knowledge and experiences to enable you to gain greater insight into past situations, and apply this knowledge and experience to future decisions.

These activities can be done alone, with a friend or partner, or in small groups. Shared perspectives on yourself can often reveal things you may never have been aware of about yourself. "Guided," introspective thinking--thinking honestly about yourself-- is the key to successfully reaching this goal. Having this knowledge about yourself means gaining a clearer picture of who you are, your needs, what type of person you are, and how you think. This knowledge about yourself can help you to make informed decisions about your options after high school and your career path. You will know why you make the choices you do and what leads you to certain areas.

Knowledge is power and the more you know about yourself, the more powerful you become. Becoming informed increases your chances for success. The goal is to empower yourself with information about you. You will become more comfortable with yourself, more confident in your abilities, and confident with your choices.

Activity 3.1

Picture yourself as a person in a photograph. From the following list check the words that describe you. These are just a few of the many words which may describe you. You can use others if you wish.

___ Thoughtful
___ Funny
___ Polite
___ Calm
___ Happy
___ Outgoing
___ Impulsive
___ Friendly
___ Professional
___ Hardworking
___ Motivated
___ Laid Back
___ Modest
___ Honest
___ Quick to Answer
___ Stylist
___ Down-to-Earth
___ Organized
___ Mature
___ (Other: ____________________)

___ Conservative
___ Serious
___ Impatient
___ Nervous
___ Angry
___ Shy
___ Cautious
___ Unfriendly
___ Casual
___ Lazy
___ Uninterested
___ Energetic
___ Confident
___ Smooth Talking
___ Slow to Answer
___ Candid
___ Aloof
___ Disorganized
___ Youthful

When you're finished, look at your list. Pick three that best describe you.

1. ____
2. ____
3. ____

IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Strengths and weaknesses vary from person to person. What may be a strength for one person may be thought of as a weakness for someone else. For example, being friendly and outgoing can be a strength because you meet people and by talking with them you can gain information. Others may see this as a weakness because outgoing people may get distracted, engage in long or many conversations, may seem to be nosey, and keep from getting other things done.

Understanding what your strengths and weakness are effect how you make decisions. We frequently will make a decision based on our perception of being able to do something and having the abilities necessary to be successful in the decision.

It is not always critical to understand *ALL* of your strengths and weaknesses at the same time. Often, it is helpful to think about specific areas of strength or weakness as they relate to the decision you are making. These areas include: Academic Skills, Employment Skills, Independent Living Skills, and Social Skills. For example, when making a decision about your career or future education, all of these skills may be equally important in making an informed decision. When making a decision about finding a new roommate, some areas may be more important than others.

The following activities will help you to identify your strenghts and weaknesses in each of these areas and to begin to use this information to make decisions.

ACADEMIC SKILLS

Academic skills include those which deal with how you think, learn, analyze, and use information. Many of us think of academic skills as how smart we are, or how good we are in school. Actually, academic skills have more to do with their use than the grades earned. For example, are your math skills good, can you write well, or do you understand the principals of electricity? These skills may be important at work, in the community, and in living independently.

Activity 3.2

Think about your Academic Skills. Write down ten that you think are important.

1. ______________________________
2. ______________________________
3. ______________________________
4. ______________________________
5. ______________________________
6. ______________________________
7. ______________________________
8. ______________________________
9. ______________________________
10. ______________________________

From this list, write the skills which are Strengths for you in the column below. Write the skills which are Weaknesses for you in the other column.

STRENGTHS	**WEAKNESSES**
1. ______________	1. ______________
2. ______________	2. ______________
3. ______________	3. ______________

EMPLOYMENT SKILLS

Employment skills are those things which help you get and keep a job. You need skills in several areas, including: people skills (getting along well with others), work skills (such as operating certain equipment such as a computer or a driving a truck), and basic skills (such as speaking clearly, reading, writing, and math). Generally, all of these skills can be used in more than one job. For example, if you have good computer skills, you may be qualified for a wide variety of jobs.

Activity 3.3

Think about your Employment Skills. Write down ten that you think are important for any job.

1. ______________________________
2. ______________________________
3. ______________________________
4. ______________________________
5. ______________________________
6. ______________________________
7. ______________________________
8. ______________________________
9. ______________________________
10. ______________________________

From this list, write the skills which are Strengths for you in the column below. Write the skills which are Weaknesses for you in the other column.

STRENGTHS	**WEAKNESSES**
1. ______________	1. ______________
2. ______________	2. ______________
3. ______________	3. ______________

INDEPENDENT LIVING SKILLS

Independent living skills are those which are important for functioning as an independent adult. These skills can be thought of as self-management skills, such as taking care of bills and banking matters, cooking and cleaning, getting to and from work, taking care of health care needs, etc. Independent living skills can be different for different situations. For example, living in a dormitory is different from living in an apartment; living alone is different from living with others; and taking care of yourself is different from taking care of a family.

Independent living skills can vary depending on both life style and age. A young person living on her own may have a small apartment, furnished with things no longer needed by her family or friends. A woman in her 30's may want furniture more to her taste, which she pays for, and wants to collect enough possessions for a large apartment.

Where you live can also effect the independent living skills you need. Small town living is different from big city life, rural life styles are different from urban or suburban life styles. Transportation, support services, and living expenses will also vary.

In your life you may need several different kinds of skills, depending upon changes in your life and employment. You may move to the city or get a better paying job. However, there are basic independent living skills, which, like employment skills and academic skills, are basic and apply to most situations.

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Activity 3.4

Think about your Independent Living Skills. Write down ten that you think are important.

1. ______________________________

2. ______________________________

3. ______________________________

4. ______________________________

5. ______________________________

6. ______________________________

7. ______________________________

8. ______________________________

9. ______________________________

10. ______________________________

From this list, write the skills which are Strengths for you in the column below. Write the skills which are Weaknesses for you in the other column.

STRENGTHS	**WEAKNESSES**
1. ______________	1. ______________
2. ______________	2. ______________
3. ______________	3. ______________

SOCIAL SKILLS

Social skills are those which effect how well you relate and get along with others. Like academic, employment and independent living skills, there are many. Some examples include grooming, talking to others, being responsible or polite, dealing with frustration, dating, meeting people, etc. These are skills which effect how well we get along in social situations.

Activity 3.5

Think about your Social Skills. Write down ten that you think are important.

1. ______________________________
2. ______________________________
3. ______________________________
4. ______________________________
5. ______________________________
6. ______________________________
7. ______________________________
8. ______________________________
9. ______________________________
10. ______________________________

From this list, write the skills which are Strengths for you in the column below. Write the skills which are Weaknesses for you in the other column.

STRENGTHS	**WEAKNESSES**
1. ______________	1. ______________
2. ______________	2. ______________
3. ______________	3. ______________

Activity 3.6

Putting your strengths and weaknesses together. Let's take a look at the lists you've made. They tell something about how you look at yourself and your world. For each area: Academic, Employment, Independent Living, and Social Skills, list three major strengths and weaknesses for each.

Academic Skills

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. ______________________	1. ______________________
2. ______________________	2. ______________________
3. ______________________	3. ______________________

Employment Skills

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. ______________________	1. ______________________
2. ______________________	2. ______________________
3. ______________________	3. ______________________

Independent Living Skills

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. ______________________	1. ______________________
2. ______________________	2. ______________________
3. ______________________	3. ______________________

Social Skills

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. ______________________	1. ______________________
2. ______________________	2. ______________________
3. ______________________	3. ______________________

Now look at this list. Answer the following questions:

1. Which strengths do you think are your strongest? Why?

2. Which weaknesses do you think are the most important? Why?

3. When and how often do you show these strengths? Under what circumstances? Who else is involved?

4. When and how often do you show these weaknesses? Under what circumstances? Who else is involved?

5. Which of the weaknesses would you like to work on during the next year?

6. Which of the strengths would you like to work on during the next year?

If you have a friend or partner working with you, ask him to complete these activities, without looking at your lists. Write that list of your strengths and weaknesses here:

Academic Skills

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. ______________________________	1. ______________________________
2. ______________________________	2. ______________________________
3. ______________________________	3. ______________________________

Employment Skills

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. ____________________	1. ____________________
2. ____________________	2. ____________________
3. ____________________	3. ____________________

Independent Living Skills

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. ____________________	1. ____________________
2. ____________________	2. ____________________
3. ____________________	3. ____________________

Social Skills

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. ____________________	1. ____________________
2. ____________________	2. ____________________
3. ____________________	3. ____________________

Compare the lists. Answer these questions:

1. **What strengths on your partner's list agreed with your own list? Write them here:**

2. **Why do you think your friend's list agreed with your own?**

3. **Why do you think there were some differences?**

4. **With this information, would you change your answers to question 5 or question 6 from before? If so, what?**

IDENTIFYING INTERESTS

Your interests give you insight into making decisions. By knowing what your likes and dislikes are, you can increase your chances for making informed decisions. In addition, your interests are key in developing a fulfilling lifestyle, and in pursuing postsecondary education and finding meaningful employment. It is important to remember that interests can, and often do, change over time. This makes it even more important to be in "tune" to what your interests are, and how they effect decision making.

The next activities will help you to identify your interests and the ways that you fulfill them.

Activity 3.7

In the chart below, list ten ways you like to spend your time. Think of things that you enjoy doing, things that you would choose to do if you did not have other demands on your time, things that interest you the most.

WAYS I LIKE TO SPEND MY TIME	**HAVE I DONE THIS IN THE PAST MONTH?**
1. ____________________	1. ____________________
2. ____________________	2. ____________________
3. ____________________	3. ____________________
4. ____________________	4. ____________________
5. ____________________	5. ____________________
6. ____________________	6. ____________________
7. ____________________	7. ____________________
8. ____________________	8. ____________________
9. ____________________	9. ____________________
10. ____________________	10. ____________________

Now look at your list. Answer the following questions.

1. **What do these things tell you about yourself?**

2. **How do your interests compare with how you describe yourself?**

3. **Do your interests match your list of strengths and weaknesses? How?**

Now that you have listed your interests, take a look at how you actually fulfill these interests. For example, you may be interested in sports. How do you fulfill this interest? Do you participate in sport activities, like softball, football, etc.? Do you coach a team? Do you go to the gym and work out? How you pursue things you like can help you identify ways to make other decisions, or to identify alternatives or options.

Activity 3.8

Look at your list of ten interests. Select three and complete the following activity.

Remember, for each interest there may be a variety of ways to fill this interest. If you like swimming, for example, you can swim at a local pool, vacation on the beach, join a swim team, work at a pool, join a health club, work at a store that sells pool equipment, take swimming lessons, be a lifeguard at a summer camp, etc.

After describing how you fulfill your interest, try to expand on the activities to pursue the interest. Creatively expand possible ways to fulfill your interest. Examples are include: work, hobbies, leisure time, reading, participating, watching, etc.

1. **Interest:** ________________________________

   Activities you use to fulfill the interest:

   Other ways someone could fulfill this interest:

2. **Interest:** ________________________________

   Activities you use to fulfill the interest:

   Other ways someone could fulfill this interest:

3. **Interest:** ________________________________

   Activities you use to fulfill the interest:

   Other ways someone could fulfill this interest:

SIX STEPS IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS

Now that you have considered your unique self--your self description, your strengths and weaknesses, and your interests-- you may be ready to make some decisions about your future. Believe it or not, many of us do not exactly identify what we wish to decide before we make a decision. This can cause confusion and frustration. Often, we are confused about where this decision fits into our life. Is this a decision which will effect how we look at ourselves? Is this a decision which will effect our strengths and weaknesses? Is this a decision which will expand our interests? There are many important steps in making an informed decision. One important step is to separate your decisions in specific areas and then to define the decisions that need to be made in each area. This will help you to feel less confused, and more in control. The following is a six step process in decision making, adapted from the book **Training for Life**, by Fred Hecklinger and Bernadette Curtin (1982):

STEP 1: **DEFINE THE DECISION TO BE MADE.** What is it that you are trying to decide? Try to be specific. Is this a simple, "yes" or "no" decision, or are there many aspects to consider in making the decision? How important or critical is it to make this decision? What priority does this decision have in your life? Defining the decision to be made will help you to identify potential obstacles and alternatives.

STEP 2: **IDENTIFY THE OBSTACLES YOU FACE, AND DEAL WITH THEM.** Many people make decisions without having accurate or complete information. The most important information is that which deals with you. Realizing your strengths and weaknesses and your interests can help you to define the obstacles which you face. Being honest about potential "walls" can help you to plan to overcome them and perhaps to identify potential alternatives.

STEP 3: **GET ADEQUATE INFORMATION BEFORE MAKING A DECISION.** It is difficult to simply decide to do, or not to do something. Information helps you to identify alternatives, and to become an informed decision-maker. It is helpful to think of this step as doing comparison shopping. It would be a pretty dull world if you were looking for a shirt and had only one style and one color to choose from. When making a decision, consider the alternatives. What are they? List the advantages and disadvantages of each. Obtain more information if needed. Then decide. This will increase the chances that you will make a decision that makes you happy, and one that you are comfortable with.

STEP 4: **BEFORE MAKING A DECISION, ALWAYS COMPARE BETWEEN AT LEAST TWO ALTERNATIVES.** Major decisions always involve choosing between different options, each of which will reflect your personal values. Identifying what the options are, and listing their advantages and disadvantages will help you look clearly and honestly at the choices, and to then decide on the option which best meets your needs. An example is choosing a college. The options include going away from home, living at home and going to a community college, etc. When you understand how these options make you feel, you increase your chances of making a choice that you can live with comfortably. Never make a decision based on only one option.

Step 5: **Know Yourself--Know Your Personal Values, Skills, and Interests.** Some people make decisions quickly; others delay the decision making process, hoping that things will work out. People make decisions based on their comfort level. Some are "take charge" decision-makers, others let events make decisions for them. As you enter the decision making process, be honest with yourself. Know what your confidence level is, what your strengths and weaknesses are in relation to the decision to be made, and identify your interests. Knowing and understanding yourself will help you to actively take charge of your decision making process. This knowledge will help you to define the decision, get information, and choose between alternatives. After considering all of this, you may decide to do nothing, you've made an informed decision after careful consideration. You are more likely to be satisfied with your decision than if you had not thought it through.

Step 6: **You Decide--Don't Let Others, or Events Decide for You.** Make your decision, and take responsibility for it. Own up to your choices, and realize that you've made a decision based on the information you have and consideration of the alternatives, and yourself.

If you find yourself having problems making a decision, ask yourself the following questions. They may help you to identify the source(s) of your difficulty:

1. Are you motivated to make the decision? Is this decision a priority? Is it important to you that you make this decision?

2. Are you creating obstacles for yourself? Do you have the understanding of yourself that we discussed earlier? How can you re-evaluate, re-group, and get over the obstacles you may be making for yourself?

3. If there are external obstacles, how important are they? Are family issues, time and money having an impact on your decision making ability? How can you get around these problems?

4. Do you have the information you need? Have you identified alternatives? Do you need to collect more information?

5. Have you set a timetable for yourself? Are you selecting realistic goals? Make a commitment to yourself, and stick to it? Re-adjust your timetable if you need more information to list alternatives or to remove obstacles.

6. Are you trying to make several decisions at the same time? Try to prioritize decisions to reduce stress and frustration.

Activity 3.9

Use the following worksheet for making a decision.

1. What is the decision to be made?

2. List the alternatives?

3. List the advantages of each alternative?

4. List the disadvantages of each alternative?

5. What are the obstacles (pitfalls) that must be faced?

6. Which alternative do you like best?

7. How do you carry out your decision?

Having difficulty? Re-read the questions which came before this activity.

SUMMARY

Strategies for decision making were discussed. To review, these strategies are:

1. Understand yourself.
2. Understand your strengths and weaknesses.
3. Identify your interests.
4. Practice the six steps to decision making.

Although we all make decisions every day, it is important to remember that the decisions we make will have a direct impact upon our abilities to interact with others. Making decisions which involve others are among the most difficult to make. In addition, decision making skills have a direct impact upon other skills discussed in this guide, including communication, solving problems, coping, finding employment, and investigating postsecondary opportunities.

You may find it helpful to try these activities several times to make different decisions. Select an easy decision and work your way through more complicated ones. Keep these suggestions in mind as you work through the other chapters, and build upon your skills.

To Parents:

This chapter focuses on decision making. This is something which we all do daily, but rarely stop and think about how we do so. Many of the decisions we make are minor and have few consequences--thus we become lax in our approach to them. There are other decisions which have long term effects on us and others. These deserve more time and attention. Review the strategies and steps to decision making presented. Think about the last time you used this process. It may be helpful to have examples of how you make decisions and to share them with your young adult. Remember that your young adult is entering a time when many major life decisions are to be made. You can help by providing practice in decision making skills. This can be done by setting up opportunities to make choices. First, by deciding between two acceptable choices. Then, later, after practice and a gradual building process, the young adult will be ready for more difficult decisions.

Here are some words that may be of help to you in discussing decision making with your young man or woman:

alternatives
clarify
decide
goals
implement
probability
risk
strategy

apply
criteria
evaluate
identify
options
resources
situations
values

Chapter 4

Following Directions

In this chapter, we will look at the skills necessary to follow directions. The ability to follow directions is a critical skill. Much of our school and job success depends on the ability to listen and follow directions. In fact, this skill can have a great impact on your ability to get along with others. This is a skill that does not come easily to many people with learning disabilities.

Topics in this chapter include:

* **Analyze the steps involved**
* **Double Check Directions**
* **Rehearse New or Unfamiliar Directions**

ANALYZE WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

Most of what we do is made up of many complex behaviors. For example, a very simple thing like brushing your teeth is really made up of many behaviors. Yet each one of these behaviors must be learned and practiced enough to become habit. Over time we have learned to perform them almost automatically. For instance, when we brush our teeth, we have learned to get the toothpaste, put toothpaste on the brush, turn on the water, brush our teeth, rinse our mouth, rinse off the brush, and to put away the brush, and to replace the cap on the toothpaste and put it away.

This is also true of social behaviors. For instance, conversations are usually made up on an opening, a middle and a closing. In order to start a conversation you need to do the following:

* know how to greet the other person,
* anticipate what you can say that will be of interest to the other person,
* wait for the other's response,
* listen to the response,
* respond with a related statement, and
* make a closing statement when the conversation comes to an end.

Having even a simple conversation means engaging in several complex behaviors.

First, let's try looking at some of our every day behaviors then we will try some more challenging ones.

Activity 4.1

Write down what it means when you must do the following things. Then compare your descriptions with your parents, a friend, or partner.

Clean up your room

Get ready for a date

Study for an exam

Circle the parts of the jobs you are successful with and underline those that you have trouble with.

Now try a different task, one that you will need in the future. Go through the same process as in the activity above. Try:

Renting an apartment

Opening a Bank Account

Applying for college

DOUBLE CHECK DIRECTIONS

Check to see that you understood the directions by repeating them. If you are the type of person who forgets or is easily distracted in the middle of a task with several steps, use questions to make you think. Or, ask those assigning the task to break it down into several steps. Another trick is to write down each step and cross them off as you complete them. Another trick is called "self-talk." This is where you talk to yourself about each step as you work on the task. An example follows.

* * * * *

Making Breakfast. It was Stan's turn to make breakfast. He knew that there were several steps to go through. First he went into the kitchen. After making the coffee, he then decided what to fix. Stan decided on bacon, eggs and toast. He first told himself to look in the refrigerator to see if there were eggs and bacon. He took them out. Next he told himself to get out the skillet. First, he prepared the bacon. Stan set the bacon aside. Next, he scrambled the eggs. Stan set the eggs and bacon in the oven to warm. Next, he took out the bread and prepared the toast. While the bread was toasting, he remembered to get out the plates, glasses and silverware. Stan then set out the milk and orange juice. When the toast was ready, Stan set the breakfast on the table. After the meal was done, he went over another list in his mind which told him to check and be sure that everything was turned off and to put the extra food and dirty dishes where they belonged before leaving the kitchen.

* * * * *

Sarah needed to do the laundry. This was a task she had seen her mother do but she had not done it by herself before. She was worried about forgetting so she made herself a list of steps and crossed them off as she went. Her basic list looked like this:

- *sort the clothes*
- *put one pile in the washing machine*
- *add soap*
- *add bleach or softener*
- *set controls*
- *close lid*
- *start the machine*

* * * * *

If you find it hard to remember all of the steps to a job, make yourself a file card for each routine task. Then, when you need to do a job, you can pull out the card and check each step. You can get one of your parents, a teacher or a close friend to help you make the cards. Check with the other people living in your home on the best place to stick-up each card, you want it near where you do the job but not in anyone's way. Don't be embarrassed by the cards, after all, all good pilots go down a checklist of steps before each take off. When each step is important, it is OK to go to special trouble to remember.

REHEARSE NEW OR UNFAMILIAR DIRECTIONS

If you are going to learn new information, you might want to "rehearse" it so you will be more familiar with the content when it is needed.

One problem with new directions or procedures is you may not know some of the words. You can fix this by finding out what they mean and/or re-writing them in your own words. Look at the next example.

* * * * *

Barry received a new camera for his birthday. He was excited and anxious to use it. Barry took out the directions for using the camera. The first thing he had to do was *to load the film. Barry looked at the directions:*

> *To open, push the Camera Loop Back up toward the camera top. Place the film in the Film Chamber. If the film length protruding from the cartridge is too long or short, adjust it so that the film lies within the Film Tip Mark (A). Close the Camera Back and the film will automatically advance into position and the Exposure Counter will show "1".*

Barry tried to load the film, but had difficulty. Barry could not get the camera to open, or the film in the correct position. Barry asked his father for help. They decided to re-write the directions, and to place color codes on the camera. The directions looked like this:

STEP 1: *To open the camera, push the green dot up towards the top of the camera.*

STEP 2: *Drop the film into the groove inside the film chamber.*

STEP 3: *If the film is too long or short, turn the handle on the film. This will either adjust the film to make it longer or shorter. Adjust the film so that it reaches to the blue dot.*

STEP 4: *Close the camera. You will hear the film winding into position. The WINDOW will show the number "1". You are ready to take pictures.*

* * * * *

SUMMARY

Strategies for helping you remember steps in following directions were discussed. To review, the strategies were:

1. Analyze the steps involved.
2. Translate words you do not know.
3. Write the steps on a card.
4. Put cards for routine tasks in a useful place.
5. Practice new or unfamiliar directions.

To Parents:

This chapter focuses on the ability to follow directions. After you read the chapter, think about ways you can help. Remember, one of your responsibilities is to be a good role model. Further, do not allow yourself to be irritated by repetitions or requests for the repeat of instructions. Remember, these are techniques which are being learned and it is often best to "overlearn" at first. You need to reinforce the behavior by attending to it.

A second activity for you is to analyze how you give directions to your young adult. Remember, an individual with a learning disability does not process information in the same way. Do not feel that you are treating him or her like a younger child when you change the way you give instructions. It is important to accept the fact that some people need instructions given in a certain way in order to follow them. Each of us has certain strengths, weaknesses, and preferences.

One problem which will arise is your ability to distinguish whether your son or daughter is being a typical young adult and testing his or her independence OR has he or she simply not understood your instructions as given. Both are possible. If you first rethink how you gave the directions and whether you did so in a way conducive to an individual with a learning disability being able to comply. When your directions are clear, specific, and stated in concrete terms, it will be easier to discern between these options.

Chapter 5

Solving Problems

In this chapter, we will discuss strategies for successful problem solving.

Topics discussed in this chapter include:

- **Using Problem Solving Steps**
- **Choosing the "Right" Time**

As young children, we all look to our parents to solve our problems; to "fix it." Every young child is naturally dependent. But as we grow up and mature, independence increases. Total independence comes when we move to our own place, make our own decisions, support ourselves, and perhaps become parents ourselves. With each step: leaving high school, getting a job, going to college, getting a place of our own, etc., we gain more independence. As you become accustomed to each new level of independence, you will develop self assurance, responsibility, and the ability to solve your own problems.

STEPS IN PROBLEM SOLVING

Different models for problem solving and conflict resolution exist, but generally all involve a sequence of steps which begin with identifying the problems, taking responsibility for the problem, generating solutions, projecting the outcomes/consequences, finding the best solution and setting up a plan of action, implementing it, followed by evaluating the outcomes. Let's look at these steps by using the following example.

* * * * *

> *The Senior Prom is coming up in three weeks and Ron would like to go. Ron has never gone to a formal dance before, and since this is his last year of school and he'd really like to go. Also, Karen has been hinting that she'd like him to ask her to the prom. Actually, Ron would really like to take Karen. However, since he has never been to a prom before, Ron is worried about exactly what's involved. He knows that he must first ask Karen if she'd like to go with him. He also knows that he and his date will go out to dinner, but is unsure of where to go, and whether or not to ask another couple. Other expenses will include renting a tuxedo and buying flowers. He will also need transportation. Another problem is that Ron feels he's not a good dancer, and Karen loves to dance. This is beginning to sound very difficult, possibly embarrassing, and certainly expensive.*
>
> *What should Ron do?*

* * * * *

STEP 1. DEFINING THE PROBLEM.

Sometimes the hardest part of problem solving is recognizing what exactly is wrong. Frequently, we have general ill-defined feelings about a situation and have trouble pinpointing the exact problem. It may be helpful to answer these questions. There may be more than one answer to each question.

Who or what is the problem about?
Where does the problem happen?
What events lead to the problem?
When did it happen?
How did it happen?
How do you react when this happens?

In Ron's case, his problem would appear to be deciding whether or not he really wants to go to the prom. Once this decision is made, Ron will need to list all of the parts of the problem. Then the questions above can be answered. Use asking Karen out to the prom and try to answer the above questions.

STEP 2: TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PROBLEM.

Once you have answered these questions, it is important for you to take responsibility for the problem. This can be difficult to do. Sometimes we can look at a problem and feel so overwhelmed that we can not see clearly where our responsibility lies. One clear question to ask yourself is, "What part or parts of the problem do I own?" Try to establish clear lines of responsibility. Which part of the problem effects you and your behavior the most? Which part or parts of the problem are within your ability to control? Where can you act to take charge and begin to solve the problem?

In Ron's example, he might realize that it is within his control and responsibility to take the actions necessary to go to the prom. Clearly, asking Karen is the first step. The other parts of the problem: going to dinner, renting a tuxedo, getting flowers, obtaining the money to go, and arranging for transportation, are all parts of the problem which Ron can work out.

STEP 3: GENERATING SOLUTIONS.

People generally call this "brainstorming." Brainstorming involves coming up with as many ideas as possible. Use your imagination to come up with new possible actions to deal with the problem situation. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers at this point. When brainstorming, it may be helpful to list your ideas about each part of the problem.

Ron's list for finding a restaurant may look something like this:

* Ask a friend who's been to a prom before about the costs.
* Earn some extra money to cover the expenses.
* Ask his parents and friends for suggestions about a good restaurant.
* Ask Karen where she would like to eat dinner.
* Talk to Karen about other couples she would like to go with.
* Consider going to a restaurant which has music so they can go without friends, but where Ron will not have to make all the conversation himself.

Step 4: Finding the best solution(s).

Go through the list of possible solutions and list the "Pros" and "Cons" of each. This means that you will have to think about what will happen if you try them. Consider possible consequences of using each solution. Remember, consequences can be both positive and negative. Now, select the best possible solutions. Then, you might want to ask someone else about what they think of your problem and your list of solutions.

Thinking about the best solution can be difficult. What you consider "the best" will depend upon your feelings and value of the problem. Are you looking for the easiest way out? Or, are you really interested and motivated to finding a solution which will make you happy? Are you interested in solving the problem to satisfy yourself, or are the needs, feelings, and interests of other people involved? Which solution will meet your goal?

Since Ron's goal is to go to the prom, and he has generated the parts of the problem, and possible solutions, he now needs to find the best possible solution to all aspects of the problem. Let's look at the part of the problem for selecting a restaurant. One potential solution included on Ron's list of solutions for choosing a restaurant, and its Pros and Cons and consequences might look like this:

SOLUTION	PROS
Earn extra money	Have the money to go to dinner and to cover the other expenses.

CONS

Will take time away from school work.

CONSEQUENCES

Make me happy.
Will make Karen happy.
Will effect school work for a short time.

Step 5: Setting up a plan of action.

Setting a plan of action involves focusing upon a solution that is reasonable and has a good chance of being successful. Through questions, suggestions, and by talking the plan over, you will be able to identify potential barriers which can cause success or failure. The specific plan of action, like the problem, deals with the *WHEN, HOW, HOW OFTEN*, and *WHO* as well as the feelings associated with these elements. What are you doing to solve the problem? When will you do it? Who is involved? What will you say?

In Ron's example, he will need to make a plan for each part of the problem. Ron will need to sequence the parts and then make a plan including: when, how, how often, and who. Listed below is an example of Ron's plan.

1. Ask Karen to the prom. Ron will find a good time to ask Karen to the prom. Times include: after school, after dinner, over the weekend, and perhaps, while on a date at the movies.

2. Ron will also ask Karen if she would like to go to dinner before the prom with a small group of friends and will also suggest a restaurant. Ron will ask her which friends she would like to go with.

3. Once Karen has accepted his invitation, Ron will call his friends, Richard and Suzanne, and ask them if they will give him a few dancing lessons.

4. Ron will call his neighbors and tell them that he is interested in earning some extra money for the prom. He will ask them if they have any jobs which need to be done around the house, such as mowing the lawn, painting, babysitting, etc. Ron will also tell his parents the same thing so they too can be looking for jobs for him to do. He will set aside time two days a week after school and on the weekend to complete these jobs.

5. Ron will ask his parents about renting tuxedos. He will set aside a time on a Saturday to rent the tux.

STEP 6: CARRYING OUT THE PLAN OF ACTION AND EVALUATING THE OUTCOME.

It's not what you *CAN* do that solves problems, but what you *WILL* do that counts. Once you have come up with a plan, carry it out. For example, if Karen agrees to go to the prom with Ron, Ron will need to carry out the rest of his plan. It is important to evaluate your plan as you go along, and be prepared to make any necessary changes. For example, Ron may have to change the days he performs jobs to make extra money, depending upon when the potential job is available. He may have to plan for more than two or three dancing lessons, etc. Finally, once you have carried out the entire plan, evaluate it's effectiveness. Were you successful? Were you satisfied with the outcome? In Ron's case, if he were to go to another dance, is there anything he would do differently? If you think of ways to improve your problem solving skills, then you increase the chances that you will use them next time.

Having ideas of how you would do things differently in the future does not mean that you did something wrong, but rather, that you've learned from your experiences.

Use the following activity to help you solve a problem.

Activity 5.1

Use this worksheet to solve a problem.

Step 1. **Define the problem:** ____________________

____

List the parts to the problem:

Step 2. **Take Responsibility.**

Which parts of the problem are in your control?

Step 3. **Generate Solutions:**

1. ____________________
2. ____________________
3. ____________________
4. ____________________

Step 4. **Find the best solutions.**

	PROS		CONS
1.	____________________	1.	____________________
2.	____________________	2.	____________________
3.	____________________	3.	____________________
4.	____________________	4.	____________________

SOLUTION TO TRY: ____________________

Step 5. **Set up an action plan.**

	WHAT?		WHEN?		HOW?
1.	__________	1.	__________	1.	__________
2.	__________	2.	__________	2.	__________

Step 6. **Carry out the plan; evaluate the outcome.**

How well did it work? ____________________

____

What could I have done differently? ____________________

____

Should I choose another solution? If so, begin again with **Step 3.**

CHOOSING THE "RIGHT" TIME

When you have a problem that involves intense feelings, it is important to realize that problem solving will involve the expression of feelings, possible embarrassment, the sharing of secrets. Problem solving will also will take clear thinking and a significant segment of uninterrupted time. Therefore, time and privacy are important. Problems should not be discussed in public places, nor with others around who have nothing to do with the problem which needs to be solved. Enough time should be allowed to discuss the problem so that you feel a beginning to a solution. Let's look at some examples.

* * * * *

> *John wanted to talk to Jeff about a problem. As roommates, John becomes angry and embarrassed when Jeff leaves his dirty clothes all around the apartment. Often, when friends come to visit, John finds himself running around hiding the mess.*

* * * * *

In this example, several steps will be involved in arriving at a solution. First, what specifically are the problems? One problem is that Jeff leaves dirty clothes lying around, instead of putting them somewhere. The next problem is that John is embarrassed by the mess when his friends come to visit. There may be some other problems which are not as apparent. Is there a place to put dirty laundry in the apartment? Is Jeff naturally messy, or think that dirty clothes belong where he has left them? Do Jeff's friends come by or is John the only one who has company? Does the mess embarrass Jeff? These questions will also need answers if John is to solve the problem.

The first step it to identify the problem. In this example, John feels embarrassed by the mess in the apartment when his friends come over to visit. He is angry about Jeff's messy habits.

It would be helpful if John takes the time to think over all the parts of the problem and has a few ideas for solutions. This will give John some specific ideas to discuss. John should also understand that, while this is a problem for him, Jeff may not regard this as a problem at all. John can avoid getting even more angry if he is prepared to recognize that Jeff may think that the problem is not important.

John will need to choose his words carefully. This problem needs to be solved, not expanded. In talking over a problem with someone, it is important to be polite, to pay attention to the other person, and to avoid embarrassing the other person by accusing him or her, or by calling them names. John can not start this discussion by saying, "You're a real slob and this dirty laundry you leave all over the place is embarrassing me in front of my friends."

The next step, in this example, may be for John to talk about the problem with Jeff. John will need to find a good time to discuss this problem. He should find a time when they are alone, when Jeff is not busy or in a hurry to get somewhere, and when they are both in a calm mood and can talk this over without getting angry and starting another problem.

A good time to discuss this problem may be on Saturday morning. John might say, "Jeff, I have some friends coming over this afternoon and I was going to clean up the apartment. I've been wondering if you could do something with your laundry. I like to have the place cleaned up when we have company, and the dirty laundry seems to be a problem."

Now, John needs to pay close attention to Jeff's reaction. Is Jeff unaware that the laundry is a problem? Is Jeff annoyed that John wants him to clean up? Is Jeff interested in solving the problem, but doesn't seem to have any ideas? Is Jeff jealous of John's friends? Or, is Jeff not interested in the problem at all?

John will need to pursue the discussion based on Jeff's reaction. John might suggest that they find a place to keep dirty laundry. They could split the cost of a laundry basket, or perhaps John could put an empty box in the closet and suggest that they put all dirty laundry in that. This is an immediate solution to the immediate problem.

If there is a more complex problem, such as Jeff being jealous of John's friends, or Jeff not wanting to do anything about the dirty clothes, then John has more problems to solve. The same process would apply:

1. Identify the entire problem and all its parts.
2. Find a good time to discuss the problem.
3. Have some solutions in mind.
4. Listen carefully to the reaction of the person you are talking to. The discussion should be a two-way conversation, not a lecture. If you are going to have a conversation, then your remarks will need to be based on what is said to you.

Let's take a look at another example:

* * * * *

In the office, Joan has a problem with Jackie's non-stop talking with other co-workers. Joan finds the chatter distracting and annoying.

* * * * *

In this example, again we have a problem which needs to be solved. Let's take another look at the steps Joan might use to solve the problem.

STEP 1. **IDENTIFY THE ENTIRE PROBLEM.** In this example, Joan is being distracted by Jackie's talking. The other parts of the problem which might be considered include:

a) Is Joan especially distractable?
b) Does Joan understand exactly what Jackie's job is? Is part of Jackie's job talking to co-workers?
c) Does Joan feel left out of the office network of interaction among co-workers?

STEP 2. **FIND TIME TO DISCUSS THE PROBLEM.** Should Joan discuss this problem with Jackie while at work? Is there a good time during the work day to discuss this problem? Joan could suggest to Jackie that they have lunch together, or arrange a get-together one evening after work.

Step 3. **Have some solutions in mind.** If Jackie's talking is too distracting to Joan, perhaps Joan could request that her work area be changed to someplace with less distractions. Perhaps Joan should make Jackie aware of the problem, and make suggestions which would help reduce the amount of noise (such as lowering voices, moving conversations to other office areas, etc.). Joan will need to carefully discuss the problem to avoid hurting Jackie's feelings or make her angry.

Step 4. **Listen carefully to the reaction of the person you're taking to.** Joan might say, "Jackie, I am so easily distracted at work, and when you come in and talk to everybody, I get interested in what you're saying and I can't pay attention to my work. Then I loose my train of thought and it takes me a long time to get going again." If Jackie says that she is sorry that she's disturbing Joan and will try to talk more quietly or less frequently, then the problem is on its way to a solution. If, however, Jackie says that she needs to talk to other people, or that she is already quietly talking, or that she doesn't see this as a problem, Joan will need to go to another plan for solving the problem.

Step 5. **Develop other solutions.** Perhaps Joan could talk to her supervisor and explain that she is distracted where she works and would be more productive if she was working in another place. Joan should be careful not to blame anyone for the distraction. If the supervisor says that there is no place to move, then Joan should be ready to make another suggestion, like switching with someone else.

Activity 5.2

You friend, Michael, calls almost every evening at about 6:30 p.m., when he gets home. You really like Michael and consider him a good friend and you enjoy talking to him. However, you are usually just sitting down to dinner with your family at this time and everyone is getting annoyed by the calls. You need to let Michael know that you want to hear from him and you like to spend time talking to him, but this is a poor time for him to call.

1. **What is the problem. What are the parts?**
2. **When do you think would be a good time to discuss this problem with Michael?**
3. **What solutions do you see to this problem. Name at lease three.**
4. **What will you say to Michael?**
5. **What do you think his reaction will be?**

Selecting the right time can be made easier when you think about times when you have the best talks with someone--your parents, brothers or sisters, friends, and co-workers. Try the following activity.

Activity 5.3

Complete the following chart by listing times or events when you have the best talks with these people:

Parents:

Best Friend:

Boss:

Teacher:

Now, look again at these times. Underline the times when you think you could talk about a problem.

SUMMARY

This chapter presented five problem solving steps to consider:

1) Define the problem.
2) Take responsibility for the problem.
2) Generate possible solutions.
3) Find the best solution.
4) Set up a plan of action.
5) Carry out the plan and evaluate the outcome.

These steps can help you develop problem solving skills. Practice them with easy problems, and then try this as you encounter more difficult to solve problems. Remember to keep in mind that timing is important and will be a factor in your successfully solving the problem.

To Parents:

Problem solving is an important skill not only for personal daily living but for job preparation. As our society has gone from agricultural to industrial and now to the information age, different skills have been emphasized. These changes are particularly difficult for people with a learning disability. It is no longer enough to be good at academic skills, one must also be good at problem solving. This is a good time to assess your own problem solving skills. As parents, you have had many opportunities to solve problems. What about at work? Does your job require problem solving skills? If not, are they required in order to be promoted? Try to be prepared with examples of everyday situations where you must use problem solving strategies.

One skill which you need to accomplish is that of breaking problems down into components. By doing this, it is easier to solve them. The best way to avoid being overwhelmed by a giant problem is to divide it into manageable pieces.

When your young adult asks for help with problem solving, be ready. Do remember that you are merely a source of information and want to facilitate his/her activities. It is very tempting and often easier to just solve the problem for them-- but this does not allow them to learn, nor does it help them when they must solve a problem or make a decision on their own. Remember, our ultimate goal is to raise independent, capable adults.

Chapter 6

Coping Mechanisms

In this chapter, we will be looking at a variety of strategies to help you better cope with impulses and feelings, such as anger. Coping with stress, knowing what to do when you're angry and generally controlling impulses are situations faced by everyone; some people face these difficulties more often than others. Even if you think you're under control most of the time, it is useful to read this chapter. This information may help you understand and get along with other people better, and, besides, there's always room for improvement.

Topics in this chapter include:

- **Controlling Impulses**
- **Expressing Anger In Other Ways**
- **Approaching The Task**

No matter how much we prepare ahead, sometimes things get stressful. We can prepare ourselves to handle these stressful times by learning certain coping mechanisms. One of the problems some people with learning disabilities have is the ability to control their impulses when upset or frustrated. Some people have the urge to run away, some to explode, and still others just want to give up. All people have their limits and when these limits have been reached they become angry, frustrated, or depressed. These feelings need to be recognized and addressed. People need to be able to release the anger and frustration in a socially acceptable manner. Some of these feelings come from being with other people either social or work situations, some come from dealing with situations or things, and others come from within ourselves.

You may find yourself frustrated by an object, like a car which just won't start. You may be frustrated by another person who teases you, won't take you seriously, or who is downright rude. You may be frustrated by your own inability to talk easily with a group of people at a party. Some of this is personal, like the person who is rude to you; other things are entirely impersonal, like the car which won't start. In any of these situations, we need to be able to deal effectively with the situation and cope with our frustration. Some of the following strategies may help.

CONTROLLING IMPULSES

Before learning an acceptable way to express anger, you must learn how to stop the impulse to react in the way which has caused conflict in the past. Even though you may know what you "should" do, impulses often prevent us from following through. It is necessary, therefore, to first give yourself something specific to do when you feel angry. This will help to control the impulse to react in an undesirable way and give you the time needed to think of other alternatives and to get yourself together.

Count to ten

Everyone has been told since early childhood to "count to ten before you say anything." Actually, that plan can work well into adult life. What you need to do when you feel yourself loosing control is to buy some time to collect yourself. Counting is a simple way to do this.

* * * * *

> *When Joe finds himself stuck in traffic, he slowly counts to ten before honking the horn, yelling out the window, or weaving in and out of lanes. If the traffic is really awful, he sings "100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" until he's out again.*

* * * * *

> *When her mother gets angry at her for something, Patty usually says something nasty in return. It's an impulse with Patty, she does it every time. Patty started silently counting to ten before answering and has begun to be able to control the rude remarks.*

* * * * *

Relaxing

Sometimes we can cope better if we can make ourselves relax. With a lot of practice, people have learned to relax even when they are upset. This takes time and patience. There are two very basic ways to relax: one is physical, and the other is mental. In other words, some people relax by doing something, while other people find it relaxing to be still and think of something else.

There are a number of different relaxation techniques. Some people go for a walk, others want to jog, some people decide to clean house, wash the car, or mow the lawn. When you need to relax immediately, but are in a situation where you can not "go for a walk," another common method is to tighten one part of your body, like your arm, while other parts stay relaxed. Tighten a part of your body for 5 seconds, then release it. Now, tighten a different part. Hold it for 5 seconds and release. Continue this until each part of your body has been tightened and relaxed. You can start with the top part of your body, or work you way up. You will learn to identify tight muscles, and how to relax them on command.

Another relaxation method is imaging. In this instance, a person may think of a calming situation, like lying in the sun, or listening to waves on the beach. There are many audio recordings of relaxing sounds (rain on the roof, water, soft music, bird sounds, etc.) which people find useful. The idea is to picture in your mind something which you find soothing. When you feel stressed, use these mental pictures or sounds to help you relax and cope.

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Activity 6.1

If you think of yourself as the mental relaxation type, try making an imaging tape. Think about the kinds of things that would make you happy and relaxed. Then dictate these mental pictures into a tape recorder and concentrate on the sensations that will help to make it real for you. Use your calmest voice. Listen to the tape daily at first. Then play the tape when you become upset. Be creative and make your tape something which will really help you to relax.

Activity 6.2

If you think of yourself as the physical relaxation type, decide on an activity to try when you are tense. If possible, walk or run around the block. Another good idea is to flex one muscle at a time, hold it for a few seconds, and then release. This type of exercise is similar to isometrics. This can even be done when you are at work, or sitting in the car in traffic. For example, if you are sitting in a chair, use your arms to lift your body out of the chair, or try to tighten and relax each muscle in turn. Squeeze a tennis ball in one hand and then another. If isometrics sounds like a good coping strategy for you, go to the library or bookstore and find some reading material about it.

EXPRESSING ANGER IN OTHER WAYS

Everyone gets angry at some time. It is OK to get angry now and then. What is important is what you do when you are angry. There are many acceptable ways to express anger. You can talk about what is making you angry or take a more physical approach, such as exercise, to alleviate the anger. Some people write about their feelings in a journal. Others may use the energy to complete projects, like cleaning the house, working on a hobby, doing yard work, etc.

If you think of anger as a valve which needs to be released as the pressure reaches a maximum safe level, it will help you recognize when to open the valve. This may mean physical exertion or talking. You can choose to talk to the person with whom you are angry and discuss your feelings. If you are not ready to be calm enough to express your feelings effectively or if you think this would not be helpful, try talking to another friend or to a counselor. It is always OK to get help when you need it.

Again, there are times when anger is personal, SOMEBODY has caused you to be angry. Other feelings of anger are impersonal, you can become angry over a job, your studies, or even an appliance. Either way, it is good to release the pressure and express your anger in a socially acceptable manner. What do you do when you're angry or frustrated? What do you say, and who do you say it to? Let's look at both situations.

Activity 6.3

Think about the last time you were really angry with someone. Make a list of what you said and to whom. Then, think about what you COULD have said which would have been more socially acceptable or which could have brought about a solution to the situation. You may want to try this activity with a family member, a friend, or another partner.

1. **What actually happened to make you angry?**
2. **What did you say? Who did you say it to?**
3. **What did you say to someone else?**
4. **What could you have said instead?**
5. **Why would it have been better to say this instead?**

USING A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO THE TASK

Break Down the Task into Smaller Steps.

Sometimes, a situation becomes frustrating. Examples include a car that won't run properly, a difficult school assignment, or something you've misplaced and just can not find. Perhaps you were supposed to be somewhere and you can't find the place or need to bring something and can't remember what it is. The resulting anger is different from personal anger described above. This type of anger is situational. Still, it is anger and it still needs to be expressed; the valve needs to be released. One solution may be to break the task down into smaller parts. If the car won't run, the parts of the problem may be:

1. Get a ride today.
2. Find out what's wrong with the car or describe what's wrong.
3. Call a repair shop.
4. Find our how much the repair will cost.
5. Find out when the shop can work on the car.
6. Arrange to take the car to the shop and make arrangements to get yourself back home, to work, or to school.
7. Arrange transportation while the car isn't working.

Once you have identified the parts of the problem, the next task is to approach each step, one at a time. If you haven't enough money to get the car fixed right away, if you need to get several estimates on the repair, if you need to check with the insurance company, if you need to talk to someone else about the car, or if you are considering not to repair the car at all, you will need to take time in between each step. If you can look at the situation as having a solution and understand that you can manage the process, the frustration will be easier to control. The real challenge is keeping the situation under your control so you do not get terribly frustrated to begin with. Seeing problems as small parts can help keep the situation manageable and your frustration at a tolerable level.

Sometimes a task is just too difficult; you can not do it. If you are too tired, if you do not understand the instructions, if you haven't got the money, or if you have gotten too frustrated to go on, it's always OK to ask for help. When you realize that you've reached your limit, get help. Having control of a situation may be knowing who or when to call for help.

Activity 6.4

Think about the last time you tried to do something which you found very difficult and frustrating.

1. **What were you trying to do?**
2. **How could you break this task down into smaller steps?**

Step 1: ____________________

Step 2: ____________________

Step 3: ____________________

3. **Is there anyone who could have helped you with this task?**

Now, think of something you did which was very difficult, but which you finished successfully.

1. **What were you trying to do?**
2. **Write down the steps you took to finally accomplish this task:**

Step 1: ____________________

Step 2: ____________________

Step 3: ____________________

3. **Did anyone help you with it? Who? How?**

Take Breaks

Another coping technique is to take breaks and come back to the job. As you finish a small portion of the task, take a short break and come back to it. You will feel less likely to become frustrated. Be sure to stop before you become too angry to be productive. For example, if you need to clean your house and do not find this job either pleasant or easy, take some breaks. Break the job down into its various tasks, such as cleaning the bathroom, vacuuming, cleaning the kitchen, doing laundry, dusting, putting away things that have been left lying around, and emptying the trash. You could use broader categories. like doing dry work, wet work, laundry. You could even break jobs down by room. There are many ways to divide a job. Sometimes, you can make this task easier by making it a "family" affair. Make a list of the cleaning jobs and pick the jobs that seem the most reasonable for you and divide the work up among members of your family, or the people you live with.

Another idea is to take on the more difficult parts of a job and to reward yourself with breaks when it's completed. For example, if you least like to clean the bathroom, do it first. Promise yourself a 15 minute break when you're done. Then take on the next job and plan another break at the end of it. You can work your way from the worst to the best job, and realize that the work will get easier as you progress from job to job. Another idea is to arrange the job according to importance, for example, by cleaning the rooms in the house that are most used--the living room first, then the kitchen, bathroom, and, finally, the bedroom.

Whatever the strategy, the idea is to reduce the frustration by looking at a large job as really a series of small tasks with rewards at the end of each. Whatever makes life more comfortable is a goal. To reduce stress is to reduce frustration. If there are fewer frustrations in your life, then you know you are coping successfully.

SUMMARY

Changing your behavior when you're angry or frustrated begins with learning to control your impulses. Counting to ten, taking a walk, and relaxing were presented as successful ways to do this. You can also learn alternative ways to express your anger, such as stating your feelings, or keeping a journal. Breaking down tasks into small steps so that you will succeed in completing the job, taking breaks, and asking for help were also presented as ways to reduce your stress and frustration.

To Parents:

For many of us, coping with feelings of anger and frustration is difficult. For some young adults with learning disabilities, these feelings can be even more intense and difficult to control. Understanding that they are, indeed, feeling angry or frustrated is the first step towards coping.

As a role model and facilitator, it is important for you to be aware how you deal with feelings of anger and frustration. How do you express your anger? How do you cope with feeling frustrated? As you work through this chapter it is important that you identify and be aware of your own feelings of frustration and anger and model appropriate responses. It is especially critical for you to delay your own feelings of frustration as you work with your young adult through this chapter. Remember that these skills can be learned and it does take practice. Reward your son or daughter's best efforts and encourage them to persevere. Once again, be prepared to offer suggestions, encouragement, and to respond to questions. Nothing works perfectly the first time; as in all things, this takes practice.

MICHAEL SIPES

by

Jackie Rooney, Oakton, Virginia

Michael Sipes was earning a "pretty good living" as a sheet metal mechanic, but he wasn't happy.

"I was good at it and was even teaching a course on it in college," he said. "But I wanted to advance in my job, to earn more money, and have more responsibility. My boss told me, 'You can't go anywhere; you're stuck in this position'."

Sipes had been "stuck" before. Although good at math and an O.K. reader, he has a difficult time with English and writing. He was held back several times in elementary school and, as he put it, "seriously messed up in high school." Sipes finally dropped out of school and got a job as a sheet metal mechanic.

"I took that job because I knew I would never have to write; I would only have to do math," he confessed.

Ten years later, he courageously decided to meet his problems head on by enrolling in a developmental English course, and did well. Then he "bombed out" in college English 101. Undaunted, Sipes discovered a learning program at a junior college. There, he was tested for learning disabilities and was found eligible for special support services.

Without benefit of a high school diploma, he was allowed to enroll at the junior college on a trial basis, and signed up for a special English program. At last, "I just kind of caught fire to school," he said. Three years later, still taking college courses, Sipes got his high school Graduate Equivalency Diploma.

Thus far, 31-year-old Sipes has earned 80 college credits as a full-time student and plans to transfer to a four-year school to get his Bachelor's degree. His goals include a masters degree and perhaps a doctorate.

Sipes has accomplished all of this while working part time as a research assistant in a chemistry lab at the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) National Cancer Institute. He took the NIH job because he was having problems with college lab courses and thought, "If I work in a lab, I'll gain confidence; confidence is the main thing I need."

Although he sometimes finds it hard to tell people that he has learning disabilities, Sipes has learned to advocate for himself. For example he said, "I was scared taking this (NIH) job because I knew I'd have to write a lot, and I didn't want people to think I was stupid. So I identified myself as LD right away."

In fact, he attributes the secret of his success in college to the good relationships he developed by using this method with his teachers. "I go to them and identify myself as an LD student who is willing to work hard. I tell them I am not looking for sympathy, but I may need a little help in some areas."

"Getting through school takes a lot of drive and hard work for a student with a learning disability. I have to read all my text books twice," he emphasized. "I am succeeding now because I am mature, and know what I have to do. But the bravest thing I ever did was to take that English course!"

Chapter 7

Investigating Employment Opportunities

In this chapter, we will look at some of the important skills necessary in employment. There is more to getting a job than filling in an application and going to an interview. Investigating employment opportunities requires planning, commitment, and patience. Many of the skills introduced in Chapters 1 through 6 can help you as you begin to think about employment, or if you are planning a career change.

Topics discussed in this chapter include:

- **FINDING A JOB**
- **INTERVIEWING**
- **KEEPING A JOB**

FINDING A JOB

Looking for a job can be as time consuming as actually working on a job. People often complain that they don't have the time or energy to look for a job. While these feelings might be real, it is important to remember that for most people getting a job they want and are good at doing requires them to spend the necessary time looking for it. It also requires you to use many of the skills discussed in the earlier chapters of this guide.

There are two situations that people looking for a job can be in: one situation is being in a job and wanting to change; the other is not having a job and wanting to get one. There is an important rule to follow if you have a job and want to change. This rule is, if possible, **NEVER LEAVE A JOB UNTIL YOU HAVE ANOTHER ONE!** Sometimes this cannot be done. Examples include: when you are asked to leave a job, your job is discontinued, or for personal reasons you are forced to quit. If it's a matter of not liking your work arrangement, do your best to hold on until you have been hired for another position. If you don't like a job, remember not to take out your feelings of being unhappy on your co-workers. Instead, make a plan to do something about it. Try to be as pleasant and as good a worker as possible while you look for another job.

What do I do?

One of the most important parts of beginning the job search is deciding what you want to do. This can be a huge task in itself because this question includes many areas which need your consideration. Some of them include: what are your skills and interests, and will you be able to make enough money to meet your needs? One of the best known vocational planning tests is John Holland's, **Self Directed Search**. The Self Directed Search assumes that:

1. Certain types of people go into certain types of work.
2. People with certain personality traits and interests go with certain work environments.
3. Work settings can be broken into six categories:

R ***Realistic***

I ***Investigative***

A ***Artistic***

S ***Social***

E ***Enterprising***

C ***Clerical***

People in the *REALISTIC* category tend to be:

- Interested in mechanical things.
- Interested in working with objects, tools, and machines.
- Athletic.
- Interested in working with their hands.
- Practical.
- Happy working outdoors.
- Looking for an active rather than quiet lifestyle.

Examples of JOBS a Realistic person might be interested in are:

- Construction worker
- Carpenter or Mechanic
- Police Officer
- Dental Technician
- Forester
- Military Officer
- Air Traffic Controller

People in the *INVESTIGATIVE* category tend to be:

- Interested in observing and analyzing before they act.
- Interested in investigating and problem solving.
- Anxious to continue their education.
- Task oriented.
- Interested in dealing with abstract problems.
- Concerned with how things work.
- Good at designing equipment.

Examples of JOBS that investigative people might like are:

- Engineer
- Chemist
- Computer Programmer
- Economist
- Physician
- Research Worker or Social Scientist
- Dental Hygienist
- X-Ray Technician

People in the *ARTISTIC* category tend to be:

- Anxious to use their imagination.
- Quite independent.
- Happiest in an unstructured environment.
- Creative.
- Unconventional.
- Innovative.

Examples of JOBS artistic people might like are:

- Actor, Actress, Singer, Musician, Composer
- Fashion Model
- Author, Reporter, Technical Writer
- Public Relations person, Advertising Manager
- Artist
- Photographer
- Music Teacher

People in the *SOCIAL* category tend to be:

- Anxious to work with people in a helpful, supportive way.
- Available to teach, enlighten and train others.
- Willing to help others solve problems and develop their potential.
- Concerned with the welfare of others.
- Skilled at words.
- Sociable.
- Humanistic in their approach to work with others.

Examples of JOBS that social people might like are:

- Clinical Psychologist
- Bartender, Waiter, or Waitress
- Social Worker, Marriage Counselor, or Child Care Worker
- Teacher, Speech Therapist
- Minister
- Personnel Director
- Ticket or Travel Agent

People in the *ENTERPRISING* category tend to be:

- Energetic.
- Available to assume a leadership role.
- Good at persuading others to do something or buy something.
- Motivated to work hard for power and status.
- Oriented to financial gains.
- Interested in managing and influencing others.
- Goal directed to move up in an organization or be self motivated.

Examples of JOBS that enterprising people might like are:

- Realtor
- Lawyer
- Farm Manager

- Business Executive
- Sales Manager, Sales Person
- Marketing Director
- Bank Manager
- Recruiter
- Insurance Investigator
- Florist

People in the *CONVENTIONAL* category tend to be:

- Happy with a system that has well defined tasks.
- Organized.
- Interested in data and using numerical and clerical skills.
- Most comfortable following the instructions of others.
- Invested in doing office work.
- Able to work best when goals are clearly defined.
- Good with details.

Examples of JOBS that conventional people might be interested in are:

- Bookkeeper
- Court Reporter
- Computer Operator
- Credit Manager
- Secretary
- Accountant
- Telephone Operator

Activity 7.1

Using the six job categories just described: *REALISTIC, INVESTIGATIVE, ARTISTIC, SOCIAL, ENTERPRISING,* and *CONVENTIONAL,* write down the three that seem like they best describe what you are interested in doing:

1. ____________________

2. ____________________

3. ____________________

Now, look at the categories you have selected. List eight jobs which you think might be interesting for you:

1. ____________________

2. ____________________

3. ____________________

4. ____________________

5. ____________________

6. ____________________

7. ____________________

8. ____________________

Now you are ready to start looking for a job in the areas you have just listed.

Where to look for a job.

A word that has become part of the job market is **NETWORKING**. Networking means letting people know you are looking for a job. An example of networking is if you are interested in working in a department store and you have a friend who is already working there, you ask your friend to let you know if any jobs become available. Then, when your friend tells you about a job opening, you immediately apply for it. Networking allows people you know to help you get a job in an area that you are interested in.

Another place to look for jobs is in the **CLASSIFIED ADS**. What you need to remember when looking in the classified ad section of the newspaper is that jobs often will be listed under more than one heading. For example, if you are looking for a job as an X-Ray Technician, you might find job listings under Technician, X-Ray, Hospital, Health Care, or Lab Technician. It is important to think of all of the possible headings a job you are interested in might be listed under. If you are asked to send a resume, it is suggested that three days after you have sent it, you contact the company, unless the ad specifically says not to call. If you do call, be sure to ask if your resume was received and if you can provide any more information. This will let the company know that you are interested in hearing from them. If you are employed and are answering a classified ad that does not tell the name of the company and only lists a P.O. Box address, be careful. You might be sending your resume to a company you are already working for--it's been known to happen. So, if you're employed and looking for a job in your same field, only answer classified ads that tell you who you are in touch with or where your resume is going.

Many times, jobs can be found on the job site **LOCATION**. For example, if you're interested in working in sales, many of the shopping malls have signs displayed in their shops indicating that help is needed. Similarly, colleges and universities will often have job listings available in their personnel office. By going to the personnel office, it is sometimes possible to have an interview on your first visit. You should be prepared for an interview if you go into a personnel office. However, sometimes you will be given an application and be asked to fill it out, and told that someone will be in touch with you. If you have difficulty in filling out the application, ask if you can take it home with you and mail it back to them later. If you do not hear from anyone after a week, call and ask what the situation is with the job you applied for. By going to the personnel office of a large company, you can look at the physical environment of the company and often get a feeling for what the working conditions are like.

Another source for locating a job are **EMPLOYMENT AGENCIES** and **JOB COUNSELORS**. The major consideration here is cost. When going to an employment agency, see how the fee for employment is paid. You want to be sure that the company where you are placed pays the fee, *NOT* the person who is placed. Be sure that you are aware of any requirements that the company who pays the fee may place on the new employee. Also, job counselors can be very helpful, but they usually will charge a fee for their service. You want to make sure that you have in writing *EXACTLY* what is included in the fee that you are paying.

The **LIBRARY** is still another source for finding jobs. You can go to the library and get a number of resource guides that list jobs. One of the most common guides is the listing of **Federal Government Jobs**. This book lists jobs throughout the country that are part of the federal government.

Other guides detailing jobs for persons with disabilities, including the **Occupational Outlook Handbook**, can be found in the library. Books relating to specific jobs are generally part of the reference library and cannot be checked out. Be sure that you have a pencil and paper ready when you go to the library, or plenty of change for the Xerox machine.

VOLUNTEER WORK is one of the best ways to find out about a job and to put yourself in a special category for being hired. The difficult parts about volunteering are: 1) finding the time to volunteer, and 2) you do not get paid. Many times, volunteer work is available at Community projects, including Day Care Centers, Homes for the Aged, and many other not-for-profit agencies. Hospitals and religious organizations generally have volunteer programs. When you volunteer your time, you get to know the staff and they get to know you. You are one of the first people to know about a job opening when you are a volunteer. If you are working full-time, it will be necessary to schedule your volunteer time for when you are not working. This might mean that you will volunteer on weekends or in the evening. Even if volunteer work does not lead to a full-time job, it often is a satisfying experience, can allow you to develop new skills, and can be put on your resume and spoken about during an interview. There are volunteer coordinators in most states and many communities. Look in the phone book or ask a personnel director if they know the number.

These are only a few of the many resources which are available to help find a job. Many more exist. For individuals with disabilities, including a learning disability, there are special laws and organizations which can be of assistance. Look in the ***Reference Section*** of this guide for more information about the HEATH Resource Center, and President's Committee on Employment for People with Disabilities.

Get Ready, Get Set, GO!

Now, you are ready to take the information you have gathered about yourself, which shows what types of jobs you are interested in pursuing, and start your job search. Remember, looking for a job is often a long, hard process.

To help you get through your job search, here is a list of helpful hints:

- **DO** be organized about records you keep on each job you look into.
- **DO** follow as many job leads as you can.
- **DO** network with people who might be able to help you.
- **DO** stay on your present job until you get a new job, if you possibly can.
- **DO** keep a positive attitude and remember it often takes months to get a new job.

INTERVIEWING FOR A JOB

Interviewing is one of the most important parts of getting a job, yet for some, it presents the most difficulty. In other aspects of seeking employment, it is possible to rely on help from friends or family members, but at the interview, you must fend for yourself. This makes interviewing the most important social skill in getting a job.

It is important to think of an interview as an opportunity to let someone know about the things you *CAN DO* that will make you a good employee. Remember, you are applying for a particular job because you believe you will be able to do a good job. The interview is your chance to talk positively about yourself.

Before the Interview

Planning can be the difference between a successful interview and one that falls flat. Once an interview has been scheduled, it is important to know **EXACTLY WHERE THE INTERVIEW IS**. Know where it is located and how to get to it. If there are any questions about the location, take time to go to the place before your meeting. If you do your "dry run" during the day, be sure to allow for rush hour traffic if it affects the time of your interview. If you are driving, remember getting into a car the day of the interview and finding the gas gauge on empty will not help you focus on the major task ahead. If you are planning to take public transportation, plan the correct route ahead of time. Try your dry run and remember to have enough change to get to the interview. Finally, if someone is going to take you to the interview, plan ahead with that person. Make sure you agree upon the time that you are going to meet, where, and confirm that the person knows where you are going.

GET YOUR CLOTHES READY THE DAY BEFORE THE INTERVIEW. Be sure that they are clean and pressed. Clothes do not have to be expensive to be appreciated, but they do have to be coordinated and suited for the job that is being applied for. Dress according to the job you are applying for. If you visit the company before the interview, look at how other people dress on the job, and prepare yourself accordingly.

Have a **FOLDER, BRIEFCASE,** or **PORTFOLIO** ready. It should contain a pen, pencil, paper, and your resume. Also, have ready a copy of information that will be needed on an application. It should be typed or neatly printed so you can use it if you need to. If you are applying for a government job, keep a copy of the government application with you. If this is a federal government job, this will be called a SF-171. State and local governments have similar forms, usually identified by a number. You should have samples of your work and any letters of recommendation in this folder.

Next, go over **QUESTIONS** that might be asked at an interview with a friend or other family member. While no two interviews are ever exactly alike, each interviewer is trying to get to know the candidates in a short period of time. There are questions that are considered "standard" for an interview and you will probably be asked some of the questions listed each time you go out on an interview. Having an idea of how you will respond to these questions will make you less nervous and will also help you to answer completely and confidently.

Activity 7.2

Below are some possible questions that might be asked during an interview. For each question, prepare a response. You could write each response on an index card. When you are finished, practice them with a friend or family member.

1. **What kind of person are you? Tell me about yourself.**
2. **Why do you think you might like this job?**
3. **What are your main strengths (skills, abilities, personal characteristics)?**
4. **What do you consider to be your main weakness?**
5. **Tell me about your past work experiences.**
6. **Tell me about your last job and some things you liked about it. Can you tell me some things you did not like about it?**
7. **Why should I hire you?**
8. **Tell me what you know about the job you're applying for.**
9. **Why would you like to work for this company?**
10. **How well do you work under pressure?**
11. **Tell me about the times in your work history when you were unemployed. What did you do during these times?**
12. **Have you ever been fired or asked to leave a job? Why?**
13. **You don't seem to have stayed at any one job for very long. Can you tell me why? How long do you plan to stay at this job?**
14. **What are your salary expectations?**
15. **When would you be available to start working?**
16. **Would you be willing to work overtime and on weekends?**
17. **Do you have any questions about this job?**

At the Interview

Arrive a few minutes early for the interview. Greet the receptionist pleasantly and state your name and who you are there to see. Do not act impatient if you are kept waiting. Here are some suggestions of what to do and not to do at an interview.

DO'S

- Greet the interviewer by name
- Look the interviewer in the eye when you are introduced.
- Look at the interviewer when you are talking.
- Give a firm, but not bone crushing, handshake.
- Speak as clearly as possible.
- Answer as many of the questions as you can. Do not be afraid to say, "I do not know," if you are uncertain about an answer.
- Respond to questions in a positive manner and stress your strengths.
- Ask the interviewer to repeat a question if you did not hear it or understand it the first time.
- Remember to bring in your strengths and what you can offer the company.
- When the interview is over, thank the interviewer, smile, shake hands, and leave in a positive manner.

DON'TS

- Chew gum.
- Smoke--even if the interviewer does.
- Place anything on the interviewer's desk.
- Play nervously with your keys, rings, pen, or tie.
- Swear or use slang.
- Slouch or look tired.
- Tap your fingers on the desk or crack your knuckles.
- Mumble or speak too softly.
- Argue, act defensive or secretive.
- Talk non-stop.
- Wear a hat or dark glasses.
- Talk about personal problems.
- Talk negatively about past jobs, school, or supervisors.
- Give up if you think you gave the wrong answer to a question.

About Your Learning Disability

An important part of your interview will be whether or not to talk about your learning disability. There is not a set way of how this should be done, or even if it should be done. What you say about your learning disability will vary from interview to interview. Consider who the interview is with. If the interview is in a very general situation, like a screening interview in the personnel department, you may not want to discuss your learning disability. You may not want to discuss your learning disability over the telephone. However, if the interview is with your prospective supervisor, you may decide to discuss your learning disability. Whatever you decide, there are some things you should know. First, it is illegal for employers to discriminate on the basis of having a disability. Second, you want to emphasize your strengths and the contributions you can make to the company. If you do decide to discuss your learning disability, it is important to have a clear idea of how you will discuss it. The best way to get ready for this kind of discussion is to role play what you will say.

Activity 7.3

Prepare answers to the following questions. Then role play an interview with a friend, family member, or partner.

1. **What is a learning disability?**
2. **How long have you had your learning disability?**
3. **What positive aspects of your learning disability affect your job performance (you concentrate more, listen more carefully, etc.)?**
4. **How does a learning disability affect your job performance?**
5. **What types of special assistance will you need to perform your job?**
6. **How can your employer learn more about learning disabilities?**

Remember, your decision to discuss your learning disability is a personal one. Circumstances will vary, and it will also involve taking risks. In addition, your must feel comfortable about your learning disability, and above all be confident in yourself. This means that you should have a good attitude about yourself, and be able to express this in a positive manner. The key to discussing your learning disability is being able to focus on the positive contributions you can make, while stating in a positive and specific manner what you will need to make the job successful for you.

After the Interview

After the interview, it is a good idea to write a follow-up letter which thanks the interviewer for his/her time. This also gives you another opportunity to state your interest in the job.

Your letter needs to include the following parts:

1. The date and address at the top right.
2. The persons name and address on the left.
3. A greeting, such as Dear ....
4. An introduction telling the person that you enjoyed having the interview.
5. Any remarks about things you will do to follow up the interview.
6. A statement that you are interested in the job and look forward to hearing from the company and how you can be reached.
7. Closing, such as sincerely, and your signature.

A sample thank you letter follows:

* * * * *

May 22, 1989
604 Holly Dr.
Anywhere, MA 02485

Ms. A.B. Cee
Saturn Novelty Company
1224 Holiday Street
Anywhere, MA 02486

Dear Ms. Cee:

I enjoyed meeting with you and appreciate your taking the time to tell me about the position at the Saturn Novelty Company.

As you requested, I am enclosing a copy of my transcript from Fairview High School and also from Lincoln Community College. I have requested that an official transcript be sent directly to your office.

I would very much like to work at Saturn and look forward to hearing from you about the job. I can be reached during the day at 720-3456.

Sincerely,

Mary G. Lightly

* * * * *

You will find it helpful after an interview to go over how the interview went with a friend or family member. This will help you decide what you did well and what you will practice and change for the next interview.

There is something to be learned from every interview you go on. Some interviewers will make you feel good and will be easy to talk to. Others will make you feel anxious and ready to get out the door as quickly as possible. The best way to get comfortable with interviewing is by knowing what to expect and to practice. The best way to practice is to keep interviewing.... GOOD LUCK!

Activity 7.4

Use the following checklist to complete for an interview.

IN ADVANCE:

____ Know exactly where the job interview will be held and how to get there.

____ Memorize three strengths you have that relate to the job.

____ Have a folder ready with samples of your work, letters of recommendation, pen, pencil, paper, and resume.

____ Have information that will be needed on an application form clearly printed in your folder.

____ If applying for a government job, have a copy of the completed application in your folder.

____ Dress appropriately for the interview. Have your clothes prepared in advance.

____ Complete plans for how you will get to the interview.

____ Complete a dry run of these plans before going to the interview.

____ Have clearly in mind the information you want to give and the questions you want to ask.

AT THE INTERVIEW:

____ Be a few minutes early for the interview.

____ Tell the receptionist your name and state who you have an interview with.

____ Be ready to answer questions that are asked.

____ Have questions that you want to ask about the job.

____ Know how you want to present your learning disability and how it relates to this job, if YOU choose to.

____ Thank the interviewer for their time and ask for a time when they will notify you about the job.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW:

____ Go over the interview with a friend or family member to see what you did well and what you will improve for the next interview.

____ Write a follow-up thank you letter.

DECIDING TO TAKE OR NOT TO TAKE A JOB OFFER

Often, people think that if they are offered a job, they must accept it right away. This is not true. There are three different ways of considering a job offer:

OPTION 1. **ACCEPT THE JOB OFFER RIGHT AWAY.** If you have all of the information you need about the job you have interviewed for and you are satisfied with the salary and the working conditions, then you will be wise to accept the job at the time it is offered to you.

OPTION 2. **TURN DOWN THE JOB OFFER.** Sometimes during an interview you will realize that there are parts of the job you definitely do not like. It could be that the work is not at all what you are interested in doing or the hours are unreasonable because of other commitments you have. Sometimes, the salary is far below what you thought it would be. If any of these are true and you are offered the job, politely tell the person who offers you the job that you appreciate the offer but cannot take the job.

OPTION 3. **SAY THAT YOU NEED TIME TO MAKE A DECISION.** When interviewing for jobs, it is possible that you will be waiting for offers from more than one company. It is important to let the person making the job offer know that you appreciate their calling and you will call back in a day or two with your decision. You can then call the other company you are waiting to hear from and tell them that you have been offered a job and would like to know when they will be making their decision. Whether or not you decide to take the job offered, you must call the company back and give them your decision within the agreed upon time.

SOCIAL SKILLS NECESSARY FOR KEEPING A JOB

All of your efforts in looking for a job have finally paid off and you are riding the wonderful feeling of having gotten a job. Believe it or not, you are now going to be confronted with the most difficult part of all, keeping a job. Many people do not realize that keeping a job involves many skills in addition to those required to actually perform the job. In some cases, a person's inability to maintain good social skills results in their loosing the job.

Activity 7.5

To help you see what kind of skills are needed to make you a good employee, let's stop and put you in a new role. For a moment, imagine yourself as the owner of a company and very anxious for it to be successful. What are the qualities that you will look for in the people you hire? In the space below, list six qualities that would make someone valuable to your new company.

1. ____________________

2. ____________________

3. ____________________

4. ____________________

5. ____________________

6. ____________________

Now, compare your list with one developed by the Virginia Employment Commission:

- Trying to always do a job well.
- Working on your own.
- Being on the job when you are supposed to be.
- Getting the job done.
- Showing that you are accurate and capable.
- Not talking badly about the company.
- Getting along well with co-workers.
- Being pleasant.
- Showing that you are willing to help others.
- Helping with jobs that are not necessarily yours, when asked.
- Working on difficult projects from start to finish.
- Making sure all of your responsibilities are met.
- Using creativity to solve difficult problems.

Compare your list with the one above. Look for qualities you feel you have. Consider these qualities when you start your new job.

Fitting Into the Job

Every company has its own stated rules, or policies, which you will be told about when you accept the job. There are also subtle, less obvious rules that you will need to become aware of. The formal company rules usually address such things as:

- Schedule for arrival, break times during the day, leaving time.
- Acceptable dress code.
- Sick leave and vacation procedures.
- Safety rules and regulations.

Many jobs have unwritten rules or procedures that you will have to learn. These rules usually cover how people interact in the office, or the policies for organizing your work area, or the rules for socializing on the job, or whether you can make personal telephone calls, etc. Some of these rules may include:

- If the supervisors are called by their first name.
- The areas where people go for breaks.
- Where the staff eat lunch: at their desk or in an assigned area.
- How messages are delivered from one department to another.
- Personal calls and visits from friends.
- Times for social conversations with co-workers.

By being aware of the stated policies and procedures of a company as well as the unwritten rules and ways people work together, you will help yourself start the job in a successful way.

Common Problems Employers Have With Employees

In order to avoid the pitfalls of being asked to leave your job, it is helpful to know what it is that employers most often fire workers for. There are four major reasons:

1. Being constantly late for work and/or leaving early.
2. Not coming to work for whatever reason.
3. Being disrespectful to a boss or supervisor.
4. Not getting along with co-workers.

While the list above states the main reasons for being fired, there are many other problems employers have with workers that can lead to being asked to leave a job. This list includes:

1. Not being able to do the work you were hired to do.
2. Problems with the law.
3. Coming to work not being clean or well groomed.
4. Having difficulty working in a group.
5. Using alcohol or drugs.
6. Talking about your personal problems at work.
7. Getting social and personal calls on the job.
8. Showing an angry or aggressive personality.
9. Stealing or cheating.
10. Leaving the work area without permission.
11. Producing low quality work.
12. Being unmotivated.

Do any of these problems apply to you? Have you been asked to leave a job for any of these reasons? If you have, it is important that you learn how to change these behaviors and make the improvements necessary to keep your next job. You cannot undo the past but you can make a fresh start on a new job and gear your work habits to a successful experience.

What if You Have a Problem on the Job?

It is unlikely that you will have a job where there are never any problems. It is important for you to know what to do and who to talk to should a problem come up. One of the worst things you can do is tell everyone around you what your problem is, especially if it involves a co-worker or supervisor.

If your problem involves a co-worker, the best thing to do is to try solving the problem with that person by yourself. Sometimes telling someone politely that there is something bothering you about how the two of you are getting along will settle the problem right then and there.

Unfortunately, this does not always work. When you feel that you have tried to make things work as best you can and there is still a problem, go to your supervisor and explain the situation. When you go to your supervisor you need to be prepared to clearly state the problem and tell what you have done to try to solve it. You should also be prepared for your supervisor to make suggestions to you for how you can continue to work at solving the problem. Remember, even though you think the problem is because of someone else, you are the one making the complaint and you must be ready to follow the suggestions of your supervisor. It is important that you only go to your supervisor with a problem that you feel is big enough to effect your performance on the job. If you report everything that goes on that makes you unhappy, you will look like the one who is unable to problem solve.

Suppose the problem is with your supervisor? This is not always easy to solve. The risk of complaining about your supervisor is that you could get fired. If there is something that your supervisor has said or done to you that you think is unfair, the first thing you need to do is talk to that person and express your concerns. It is possible that your supervisor is unaware that what was said or done was a problem, and by knowing it, will change in a positive way. However, if the problem goes beyond this, it may be necessary to talk to someone at a higher management level in the company. Most large companies have someone in the personnel department who helps to solve problems between workers and supervisors. These problems are called **grievances**. If you take a problem to this level, you must have very specific concerns. For example, saying that you think your supervisor doesn't like you will not be taken as a serious complaint. On the other hand, stating specific behaviors that effect your performance on the job, or acts of discrimination against you, will be taken seriously. Examples of discrimination include actions which result in being treated differently or not equal because of a person's age, sex, race, religion, or disability. If you work in a small office or a setting which has no procedures for stating a complaint about the boss, it may be necessary for you to look for another job. If it is a matter of discrimination, you should seek help and information from someone in the legal profession, or go to your state's department of labor.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we discussed some of the basic skills necessary to find, accept, and keep a job. Some of these skills include:

FINDING A JOB:

- Know what your interests are.
- Use a variety of resources to locate a job such as the classified ads, networking, etc.
- Consider becoming a volunteer.

INTERVIEWING SKILLS:

- Prepare yourself before the interview.
- Consider questions that might be asked.
- Remember the tips for successful interviewing.

- Follow-up after the interview.
- Make your own decision about whether or not to discuss your learning disability.

ACCEPTING THE JOB:

- Accept the job right away.
- Turning down the job offer.
- Taking time to decide.

KEEPING A JOB:

- Consider the qualities that employers look for in good workers.
- Fit into the job by learning the stated and unstated rules.
- Avoid habits that can cause you to loose your job.
- Become an effective problem solver.

To Parents:

This chapter is a beginning discussion of the skills necessary to find, accept, and keep a job. While there is no ready "cookbook" on employment, this is a tremendously important issue for young adults whether or not they have a learning disability. Become aware of the resources in you local community which can assist you in facilitating employment for your son or daughter. Become involved in vocational and transitional planning while your young adult is in school, or seek the community resources from vocational rehabilitation if your son or daughter is out of school.

You will serve as a role model for the skills discussed in this chapter. Consider your own career path. Be prepared to offer suggestions and encouragement to your young adult. Most important of all, think about your own goals and expectations regarding employment for your young adult. Are your goals reasonable? Are they possible? Do they match those of your young adult? Perhaps this would be a good time for you to rethink the goals you set for yourself. This is a process which we all must attack. Self analysis can be scary for anyone. If you are good at setting realistic goals for yourself, it will be easier to help others to do the same.

Finally, be prepared to tackle employment in steps. We all do not find that "perfect" job the first time out. Keep in mind that the experience gained will assist your son or daughter later in his or her career. New skills can always be learned and others improved upon. Seek out advice from other parents, professionals, and family members. Share responsibility for preparing your young adult to plan for his or her career, to prepare for that important interview, and to develop the skills necessary to keep a job.

VOLUNTEER FOR SUCCESS

by

Jackie Rooney, Oakton, Virginia

When Angie Carrera was 14 years old, she noticed that there were no organized after school activities for the young children playing in the park near her home. "So I asked (one of the park officials) if I could bring a sketch pad and colored pencils to teach the kids cartooning," she said.

Soon Carrera had a regular following of budding young artists gathered around her park bench. "They asked what else they could do, so I rented a projector and showed movies," she explained.

That was how Carrera, now executive director of the Voluntary Action Center of Fairfax County Area, Inc., in Virginia, got her start in volunteerism. Although there is no pay for volunteer work, Carrera has found that volunteering can be a "fruitful experience" for people of all ages and abilities. And for a teen or young adult with learning disabilities, volunteering is an excellent way to develop job and social skills.

Practice job skills in a work environment. *For those with little or no work experience, volunteering is a way to get a feel for what an office or work environment is really like. If you have had previous jobs, volunteering is a great way to further practice job skills.*

Just as in a paid job, a volunteer is expected to be on time, follow instructions, work as a team member, be responsible for the work assigned, have organized work habits, maintain a neat appearance and accept criticism. You will get practice in being told what to do and possibly in telling others how to perform a task.

As a result, you will learn many things. Take this opportunity to watch how co-workers cope with different situations. How do they react to criticism? How do they express dissatisfaction or anger? Do you think their behavior is proper? Decide what you think is fair. Would you have done the same thing?

Explore different careers. *Volunteers can do many different things. To name a few, they collect and sort items for re-distribution, do art work for agency displays, and participate in letter writing campaigns about important social issues. They put together packages for prisoners being released or layettes for needy new mothers.*

If you are interested in health care, volunteer at your local hospital. If you are fond of animals, lend your skills to an animal shelter. Volunteers type, file, enter data into computers, answer phones, sort books, and put labels on envelopes. They are also needed to visit the elderly and to help in day care centers.

Decide what you don't want to do. *A wide variety of experiences will help you find your comfort level in a job. Finding out that you don't have the patience or ability needed for a certain type of job is a real plus.*

For example, at age 17, Carrera volunteered as a therapy aid to help three adults exercise a little girl with a physical disability. "I did it for a year. What it told me was that even though I had a great deal of compassion for those with a disability, I didn't want to do it for the rest of my life," she said.

And if one volunteer job doesn't suit you, you can still try volunteering in another area.

Carrera gave the following reasons for volunteering:

Build self esteem. *You can really feel good about yourself if you do a good job. Others benefit as well. Denny Barnett, director of Volunteer Center development, points out that you help both the agency where you volunteer and your community. As a result, there are internal benefits in "increased self-worth for the individual volunteer."*

Carrera encourages volunteers to look for local programs which really match their interests. "Volunteerism is a wonderful opportunity for young people to find self esteem on their own ground," she emphasized.

Discover new interests. *An unexpected plus for many volunteers is the chance to find out what it is like "to work for a purpose beyond a paycheck," said Carrera. Sometimes young volunteers go on to find satisfying careers in non-profit agencies which deal with these issues.*

Build and develop skills. *Your volunteer experience can lead to future employment. This is your chance, as Barnett pointed out, "to learn new skills and polish old ones. At the same time, you will be building experience which can and should be included on your resume. Volunteering is a good indicator of character," he stressed.*

Meet people and make friends. *The people you meet and work with in your volunteer job can provide job and college references and refer you to potential job opportunities.*

This is also your chance to make friends with people who have similar interests as your own. Working together and sharing experiences often leads to friendship.

Barnett advises that you should be up-front about revealing any particular disabilites that might hamper you in the work place. "Most volunteer centers will take the time and effort to make an appropriate placement," he assured.

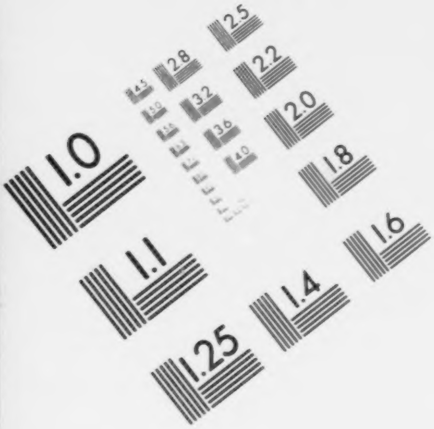
"Regardless of the disability of the individual," Barnett stressed, "volunteering is always a win-win situation!"

How to Become a Volunteer

There are many agencies which match volunteers with organizations that need your help. To find a volunteer agency:

- ***Check with your local county volunteer office,***
- ***Check with your state governor's office on volunteers,***
- ***Check with the United Way. Their telephone number is listed in the telephone book.***
- ***Call a special organization that you are interested in helping, and ask for a copy of their annual report or a brochure about their agency. This will tell you more about their program.***
- ***Check your newspaper, as it often lists organizations looking for volunteers.***

(For a nationwide listing of volunteer placement agencies, send $5.00 to The Volunteer Center, 1111 North 19th Street, Suite 500, Arlington, VA 22209, for "The Volunteer Center Associate Member Directory.")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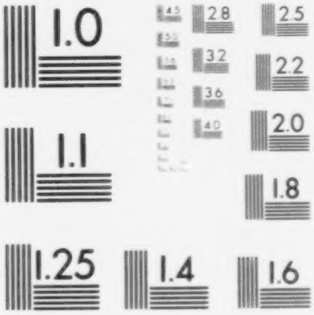
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Chapter 8

Investigating Educational Opportunities

In this chapter, we will look at some of the basic, yet important, considerations and skills to use as you explore educational options after high school. Much of this information was adapted from materials available from the *Higher Education and Adult Training for people with Handicaps (HEATH) Resource Center.*

Investigating educational opportunities incorporates many of the skills and suggestions discussed in this guide. This chapter includes many of these suggestions and applies them to the task of exploring educational programs after high school. Think about the chapters on communication, decision making, problem solving, and the section on interviewing from Chapter 7 as you work through this chapter.

Topics discussed in this chapter include:

- **PLANNING AHEAD**
- **IDENTIFYING GOALS**
- **PURSUING OPTIONS**

Exploring educational options after high school can be both exciting and anxiety producing. If you're just about ready to complete high school, you are about to enter into another exciting phase of life and to begin your life as an independent young adult. If you've been out of school for some time, you may now feel ready to begin looking at educational opportunities for many reasons. You may want to gain some advanced skills for work, or you may be interested in pursuing a professional career which requires advanced education. Whatever the reason, and regardless of where you are right now, thinking about educational options requires a great deal of thought and preparation.

* * * * *

> *Betty is about to graduate from high school. As she considers her options, she thinks about her friends. Some are definitely going to college, others have opted for a vocational-technical school, some haven't made up their minds, some are still applying, and others are out on interviews. How does she decide which one to pursue?*
>
> *Michael has been out of school for several years. He is employed as a retail clerk in a department store at the mall. Many of his friends are in college, others are in vocational training, others are in business school. Michael wanted to wait for a few years before deciding which option to pursue. Michael has decided that this will be the year. How will he decide which one to pursue?*

* * * * *

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE MAKING A CHOICE

In order to made a sound decision, and one that you will feel most comfortable with, you need to know two things:

1. Information about yourself. What are your interests, work habits, style of learning, communication skills, and ability to solve problems, etc.?

2. Information about what your options are. What are the opportunities for college? What is the difference between a four-year university and a two-year community college? How can you compare vocational-technical schools? What are the home study and adult education options available in your community?

As you consider these questions, remember that more and more individuals with a learning disability are taking on the challenge of education and training after high school. It is also important to know that postsecondary education is any education beyond high school. It includes trade or business schools, vocational-technical schools, universities, colleges, community colleges, and adult and continuing education programs.

Plan Ahead

Planning for postsecondary education is a challenge. There are many things to consider, many questions to ask and answer, and a variety of options to select from. The need for planning can not be over emphasized.

If you are in high school, it is time to give serious consideration to your academic and career goals. Here are some suggestions that may be helpful:

1. What are your main interests and favorite subjects in school?
2. Discuss career plans with and ask questions to your parents, friends, other people with a learning disability, and people you know working in jobs of interest to you.
3. Discuss academic interests and program needs with your teachers and counselor at school.
4. Make sure that your current school program includes career exploration and possible a work-study program.
5. Discuss vocational and educational testing with your guidance counselor or vocational rehabilitation counselor to help you further explore and identify interests.
6. Visit your library at school or the public library in your community for books and pamphlets which describe different postsecondary programs.
7. Write for information on postsecondary programs. Additional information is available, free of charge, from the HEATH Resource Center (One Dupont Circle, Washington, DC 20036-1193. Telephone: 1-800-544-3284.).

If you are out of school it is never too late to consider postsecondary options. Here are some suggestions that may be helpful:

1. Talk to a counselor at your local vocational rehabilitation office, community college, or vocational-technical school about your career interests and to explore the availability of programs.
2. Think about the skills you have learned through your job, hobbies, clubs and any volunteer experiences.
3. Consider your interests--what do you like to do; what do dislike doing?
4. Discuss career interests and plans with friends, parents, other people with learning disabilities, and people working in jobs that interest you.

The activity on the next page will help you to begin investigating educational options.

Activity 8.1

Use the space below to explore your interests as the start for investigating postsecondary options. Answer these questions.

Interests:

Classes I like or liked doing in school:

Activities I participate in or did in school:

My work experiences include:

One day, I'd like a job doing:

Types of activities I dislike are:

Now, look at your list. Why would you consider postsecondary education?

Name some people you could talk to about your interests:

Write or call the HEATH Resource center. Use your lists to ask for information about postsecondary options. Call 1-800-544-3284, or write to: HEATH Resource Center, One Dupont Circle, Washington, DC 20036-1193.

Now that you have begun to consider your interests, and are beginning to ask yourself questions about you, let's look at some other things to consider:

1. Do you have a high school diploma or the GED equivalent? Most colleges and many, although not all, postsecondary programs require this. If you do not, this is the first thing to discuss in planning your postsecondary options.

2. As you look at postsecondary programs review the entrance requirements. **Admission tests**, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Testing (ACT) Assessment are two commonly used tests. Generally, these tests are taken during your junior or senior year of high school. Your high school counselor can tell you where and when such tests are given. Remember, so that these tests evaluate your abilities fairly, you can request special accommodations for taking admissions tests, including someone to read the questions to you, extended time to complete the test, etc. Talk to your counselor about this. If you have already taken the tests, be sure that they are still valid. Some programs will only accept the scores for a few years. Check it out. If you need to re-take the test, the program you are investigating will have information about how to re-take the test.

   The two testing services mentioned here, the SAT and the ACT, have information available. They can also give you information about the dates and locations where the test is being given. For the SAT information you may write to: ATP, Services for Students with Disabilities, CN-6400, Princeton, NJ 08541-6400. For information about the ACT, write: ACT Assessment, "Special Testing Guide", Box 168, Iowa City, IA 52243. Remember that accommodations can be made for admissions testing to vocational-technical schools or other programs--be sure to ask.

   If youhave been out of school for awhile and have not taken any of these tests, it is very important that you look carefully at the entrance requirements of the program you are interested in. Talk with the admissions office about testing. Perhaps you can get a "waiver" for the test, or perhaps there are other tests you can take. It is important that you ask.

3. Is your educational, vocational, and psychological testing up-to-date? Some programs will require documentation of your learning disability. Many require good grades, or other information by which to make a decision to admit you. In addition, this information will help the program to provide special services to you. All of these records need to be kept up-to-date, which means that you need to have the tests re-done every three years.

Now that you have compiled the basic information, it's time to get to it.

Using Assessment to Identify Strengths and Weaknesses and to Set Goals

Educational, vocational, and psychological testing are designed to help a program identify a student's strengths and needs. By this time, you can take an active role in planning your assessment and in using the information. Assessment is the process of compiling and assimilating information about you that will help you plan your vocational and educational choices. This information comes by taking a series of formal and informal tests that identify aptitude, academic achievement, vocational interests and aptitudes, learning and work style, etc. This information can be a great tool for you and help you to identify your interests, skills, abilities, needs, and accommodations, thus enabling you to make clear and informed choices in light of realistic goals. The important thing to remember is that this is information about you--your thoughts, feelings, skills, strengths, needs--and can help you feel more comfortable with yourself and confident in your abilities. You have fewer unknowns about yourself. With this information, you become your own best advocate. This does not mean that you will not surprise yourself or others, or continue to change and grow further. It means that you can now speak more knowledgeably about yourself, and more importantly, for yourself.

When you are entering into a testing situation, these questions may help you to use the testing information more effectively:

1. What is included in this assessment?
2. What are the tests? What type of information does this test look for?
3. What accommodations in the test procedures can be used to help me do my best?
4. Will there be a written and oral report of the results of the tests?
5. Will the report make recommendations about where to go for help right away?
6. How much will the assessment cost? What does the cost cover?
7. Can insurance cover the cost? Are these funding sources for assistance? Can a payment program be worked out?

The information from testing should give you a good understanding of your learning and living needs. You should be able to talk about your strengths and weaknesses, what techniques or accommodations work best for you, and what study skills or assistance you find most helpful. Teachers, counselors, parents, and persons giving the tests can help you name the types of services or accommodations you use best.

Activity 8.2 will help you organize testing information and to begin to think about postsecondary education.

With this information, you will be ready to begin to identify your goals and begin to develop a plan for exploring and deciding upon a postsecondary program. Use this information and talk to your parents, teachers, counselors, friends, and other people with a learning disability. They can all help you to develop your goals and plan. Use Activity 8.3 to develop your plan.

Activity 8.2

The following will help you best use the information about yourself after testing. Use this chart to collect information about yourself.

Person giving the Test: **Date of Testing:**______________________

Name: ______________________

Address: ______________________ **Telephone:** ______________________

Type of Test(s) Used and What the Test(s) looks for:

1. ____
____

2. ____
____

3. ____
____

What the test results tell me about my strengths and weaknesses:

	STRENGTHS		**WEAKNESSES**
1.	______________	**1.**	______________
2.	______________	**2.**	______________
3.	______________	**3.**	______________

What the test results tell me about how I learn:

____
____

What do the tests tell me about my interests:

____
____

What are the recommendations from the testing process?

1. ____
____

2. ____
____

3. ____

Activity 8.3

Use the information from the last activity and talk to your parents about it. List your goals and discuss with them what they think. Then, make a plan for obtaining these goals.

My goals are:

1. ______________________________

2. ______________________________

3. ______________________________

What my parents think:

____

____

____

What I need to do to accomplish my goals:

Collect information from: ______________________________

____

Make calls to: ______________________________

____

List four specific things you will do. Put a time next to the task for completion.

Task 1: ______________________________

Time: ____________________

Task 2: ______________________________

Time: ____________________

Task 3: ______________________________

Time: ____________________

Task 4: ______________________________

Time: ____________________

HOW TO ACHIEVE THE OPTION YOU CHOOSE

Now that you have decided to pursue a postsecondary program, ask yourself these questions:

WHO: Who can help me find the information I need to make a choice? Your school counselor, teacher, Department of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVR), parents and information centers can all help you locate a program in your area to meet your needs and interests. Is a community college an option for you? There are directories and guidebooks that list colleges and universities, and vocational-technical schools by area of interest and support services available. These directories only provide the first line of information. It is up to you to follow-up with a letter or phone call. Be sure to request application forms, a catalog, support service information, and ask for an interview with a counselor or admissions director. When you visit the program, talk to other students with similar needs and interests.

WHAT: What are the entry requirements? If you do not meet the entry requirements, is special student status possible. Often, this status is on a trial basis. What specific course work is required for admission (like a foreign language, math, science, english, etc.)? Are waivers or substitutions accepted? What are the graduation or program completion requirements? What support services are provided? What are the costs? Is there financial aid available?

WHERE: Is this program close to home or far away? How much support do I need in the following areas: emotional, medically, financially, etc.? Does this program meet my needs? What are the transportation issues?

WHY: Why would I like this program? List you reasons. If you are deciding between two programs, list the PRO'S and CON'S of each to help you decide. What are the trade-offs? Which issues can you compromise on?

HOW: How do you want to come out of this program? What are your expected outcomes? How can you make this program work to your best advantage?

The options for postsecondary education are extensive; making the right choice may seem difficult. Some people may try several different programs before they find one that "fits." Others select a new program as their needs and interests change. Maybe your first choice will work for you--but remember, you always have a choice.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we discussed some basic strategies for investigating options after high school. These options are called "Postsecondary Options." Some of the strategies discussed included:

1. Collect information about yourself
2. Collect information about your options.
3. Plan ahead.
4. Identify you strengths and weaknesses.
5. Develop goals.
6. Talk to family members, professionals, friends, and others with learning disabilities about your interests and goals.

To Parents:

This chapter discusses some basic information for investigating postsecondary options. You can do a lot to help your young adult to prepare for life after high school. Provide encouragement, experience, and exposure to new opportunities, and provide support for your son or daughter to express their interests and goals. As you work through these activities, consider you expectations for your son or daughter. Do they match the young adult? Are they realistic?

Another suggestion is to provide your son or daughter with as much responsibility as possible for planning their future. This should be an ongoing discussion. Part of taking on responsibility is participating in the process of making decisions. When appropriate, have your young adult attend IEP meetings, let them participate in the planning of testing. Get him or her to pose questions. Your son or daughter needs to begin to understand how these meetings will effect their life, and how these plans can lead to becoming a successful, independent adult.

Be prepared to act as a facilitator in this process. Provide support, encouragement, and advice. Be prepared to answer questions as well as to pose them. Help your son or daughter collect information, but give them the responsibility for obtaining it.

Looking at postsecondary options is the beginning of the process of "letting go." This can be an anxious and confusing time for families. Prepare yourself for the transition of your son or daughter into a young adult. Realize that they are entitled to both success and failure. Be there to support and encourage them, but allow them the room to participate in making decisions about their future based upon their interests, strengths and weaknesses. Help them to become an informed decision maker, and above all, relax. This is, indeed, an exciting and rewarding time.

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ORGANIZATIONS

Higher Education and Adult Training for people with Handicaps (HEATH) Resource Center - One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036-1193. Telephone: 1-800-544-3284; (202) 939-9320 (In the D.C. Area).

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Handicaps (NICHCY) - P.O. Box 1492, Washington, D.C. 20013. Telephone: 1-800-999-5599; (703) 893-6061 (In the D.C. Area).

National Network of Learning Disabled Adults (NNLDA) - 808 North 82nd Street, Suite F2, Scottsdale, AZ 85257. Telephone: (602) 941-5112.

President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities - 1111 20th Street, NW, Suite 608, Washington, D.C. 20036. Telephone: (202) 653-5044.